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OSCAR WILDE

BY

ROBERT HARBOROUGH SHERARD

WITH A PREFACE BY  
LORD ALFRED DOUGLAS  
AND AN ADDITIONAL  
CHAPTER BY  
HUGH KINGSMILL

"Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour"

T. WERNER LAURIE  
COBHAM HOUSE, WAT  
LONDON



*T P U B L I S H E D 1937  
N IN GREAT BRITAIN BY  
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TO  
MADAME MADELEINE CLÉMENCEAU JACQUEMAIRE  
THE GIFTED DAUGHTER OF AN ILLUSTRIOUS FATHER  
THIS BOOK IS RESPECTFULLY  
DEDICATED



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## PREFACE

BY LORD ALFRED DOUGLAS

THE whirligig of Time continues to bring in his revenges in the matter of Oscar Wilde, and it is certainly an odd turn of the wheel that I should be writing a Preface to a book about him by his oldest, most faithful and most chivalrous friend, Robert Harborough Sherard.

There was a time when Mr Sherard and I disagreed rather acrimoniously over Wilde, and it has taken years of slow-grinding mills, and buckets of mud slung by, among others, Frank Harris, to bring us together again, united in our devotion to the memory of a great genius and cruelly ill-treated and injured man

I have to admit, with deep regret, that at one period I reacted violently against Wilde after having almost worshipped him for twenty years. In spite of the obvious provocation I received when I read for the first time in 1912, twelve years after his death, the "attack" he made on me in his prison letter, part of which was faked up by the late Robert Ross under the title *De Profundis*, I blame and reproach myself for having turned against him as I did when I published, in 1914, a book called *Oscar Wilde and Myself*, most of which was written by the late T W H Crosland. I have already publicly repudiated this book and have admitted in my *Autobiography* (published 1929) that a great deal of what I said, or allowed to be said, about Wilde at that time was unfair and untrue, but as Mr. Sherard has referred to the book in



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his present publication I wish to repeat what I have written, and once more to put it formally on record that I withdraw what I said against Oscar Wilde in that book. I deeply regret that the book was ever published.

Partly my reaction against Wilde was due to wounded feelings (for his attack on me in *De Profundis*, though I now regard it as pathetically harmless, was very unfair and quite undeserved) and partly it was due to an imperfect apprehension of Catholic principles.

Foolishly and unworthily I allowed my anger at the revelation of his unkind attack on me who had been, and remained faithfully to the day of his death his dearest friend, to warp my judgement and to cloud my sense of justice. I was then a recent convert to Catholicism and like most converts I tried to be more Catholic than the Catholics, and thus by spiritual pride was for the time being deprived of charity.

For let there be no mistake about this, the sending of Oscar Wilde to prison for his private immoralities or sins was an offence against Christian charity for which there can be no forgiveness for England till she admits her guilt and repents of it. For what she did she is rightly hated and denounced as a hypocrite in every country in Europe and indeed all over the civilized world not excluding the United States of America.

Needless to say, I do not defend Oscar Wilde's immoralities, as a Catholic I am bound to reprobate them. I have always been orthodox all my life, and when I was a Pagan in my youth I was an orthodox Pagan, and therefore necessarily in revolt against Christian morality. As soon as I was converted, I changed my views and my conduct, so there has never been any inconsistency about me in these regards. That Wilde was, as I have called him before, a Heresiarch and a most powerful and convincing one, does not alter the fact that he was a man of enormous genius, and that his influence on the

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whole of literary Europe has been more profound than that of any other English writer except Shakespeare.

That is not to say that I put him on the level of Shakespeare or that I give him a supreme place in English literature. I am alluding to the place which he actually occupies in European estimation, and not to the position in which I myself would place him, but I will say of him that even if he had never written a line of prose or poetry he would still be the most wonderful man I ever met, and so far beyond the ordinary "good talker" that I have never been able to discover anyone who was in the same class with him or even remotely approached it.

It is a fine thing to be a great talker, and it is a piece of good fortune when a supreme talker also happens, as in the case of Oscar Wilde, to be a first-class writer, because while talk evaporates and is lost, writing remains. Thus we are still able to imagine how good Oscar Wilde was as a talker by reading *Intentions* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*, whereas no one could ever believe that, for example, Whistler was in the same talking class as Wilde after reading the *Five O'clock Lecture* or *The Baronet and the Butterfly*. Wilde talked even better than he wrote, and those who never heard him can thus arrive at an estimate of how good a talker he was. He was as much above Whistler as a wit and conversationalist as he was as a writer. *The Importance of Being Earnest* (I know that here Mr Sherard disagrees with me) is so good that it is impossible to compare it with any comedy of a less calibre than *Twelfth Night* or *As You Like It* or *Much Ado About Nothing*. Whereas anyone who attempted to compare Whistler's published writings with Shakespeare would rightly be considered a fool.

But perhaps I am over-labouring my point which is simply that Wilde was probably the greatest talker who ever lived, not excepting Socrates who lacked Wilde's sense of humour.

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It was this wonderful man, this supreme product of culture and civilization whom the English (led by the nose by my poor father, the eighth Marquis of Queensberry) in a fit of canting hypocrisy and Caliban fury broke on the wheel and hurled into their filthy prisons where he was tortured into the loss of his wonderful powers. Well, I hope they are proud of it!

I always had an instinctive feeling that once Oscar Wilde had been sent to prison, prison became the obvious goal for any self-respecting English poet, and I never rested till I got there. It took me about twenty-five years to do it, but I succeeded in the end, and I did six months' imprisonment in the Second Division for libelling Mr Winston Churchill about the Battle of Jutland. The result is that I am one of the very few English men of letters now living, or who has been living since 1895, who can go to bed every night without feeling more or less ashamed of being an Englishman (strictly speaking I am not an Englishman as I am of almost pure Scots descent, but I am an English poet and have lived in England nearly all my life).

Of course I do not pretend (I wish I could) that at the time I went to prison I deliberately did so as a protest against the treatment of Wilde. On the contrary, at that particular moment I was against Wilde, but looking back at it all now I see quite plainly that it was the persecution and imprisonment of Wilde which turned me into the enemy and flail of English hypocrisy and cant and cruelty which I became and because of which, among other things, I shall be remembered.

As often as not one does things without knowing why one does them, but if one is in good faith and in possession of Grace one does the right thing, broadly speaking, every time.

But I fear I am writing too much about myself, even though it be only in relation to Wilde, so let me avoid further autobiographical outbursts and say that this book in my opinion

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is a noble and chivalrous defence of Oscar Wilde by the one man who knew and loved him in an entirely disinterested way from the standpoint of the normal man; a man, too, who was just as much anti-Wilde's vices as my father was! Indeed I have more than once warned Mr. Sherard that he does not know as much about Wilde's private life as do many other of Wilde's friends, and that he must beware of going too far in "whitewashing" Wilde or in trying to prove too much in his favour. There were sides of Wilde's character of which Mr. Sherard knew nothing.

But I do not think that any decent or reasonable man (and from this category I would not exclude even Mr. Bernard Shaw, who still goes on saying that Harris's disgusting and filthy book about Wilde is "*much the best intimate portrait that is likely to be drawn*") could read Mr. Sherard's utterly convincing exposure of Harris's clumsy and wicked lies and his ignoble motives, without feeling a little ashamed of the pleased acceptance of a foul libel on a great and wonderful man which was (and is still as far as I know) the official English verdict on Frank Harris's essay in mud-slinging for profit which he called *The Life and Confessions of Oscar Wilde*.

Harris's lies and libels about myself are of little importance, as it happens, because being still alive and well equipped to defend myself I was able to refute them and to force him to a written acknowledgement of their utter falsity and absurdity. I have indeed succeeded in stopping the sale of Harris's vile book in England, though I have agreed, to oblige Mrs. Harris, to its republication on certain stringent conditions; but it is still read by thousands in America and all over Europe in Davray's perfidious translation, and if it were not for Mr. Sherard it would still go down to posterity (with the blessing of Mr. Bernard Shaw and other "such dear souls") as a true picture of Oscar Wilde.

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On the other hand, I suppose one may extract consolation from the fact that all history largely consists of corrected and contradicted lies. To vindicate Oscar Wilde it may have been necessary that Harris's foul and poisonous slanders on the dead man whose friend he so impudently professed to be should first gain currency, and that the courage and fidelity of the friend of his youth (Sherard knew Oscar at least eight years before I did) should ultimately prevail against them.

As I have said elsewhere it is an error of optimism to suppose that truth in the long run is bound to get the better of falsehood as far as this world is concerned, there will always be men of ill-will who reject the truth even when it is self-evident. But if truth is not invincible, it is at any rate very powerful and, like *Toussaint l'Ouverture* in the magnificent sonnet of Mr Sherard's great-grandfather, Wordsworth, it has "great allies," the chief of which "Love and man's unconquerable mind" find noble expression in this offering of undying friendship and loyalty, the present book.

ALFRED DOUGLAS.

ST ANN'S COURT,

HOVE

*July, 1936*

# GEORGE, FRANK AND OSCAR

## CHAPTER I

### THE RAISON D'ÊTRE OF THIS BOOK

EXCEPT for the experience gained by over half a century devoted to the production of books, which has taught me that an author's preface is rarely if ever read, the following chapter would have appeared in the form of an introduction to this book, and consequently the fact that this work is an absolutely indispensable contribution to the history of English men of letters in the nineteenth century (as established by the following prefatory explanation) might have been overlooked, neglected and ignored

Some years ago the late Frank Harris, who died about a lustre since in Nice, full of years and well, no, hardly that—published in America a book in two volumes called *The Life and Confessions of Oscar Wilde*. Having offered it in vain to almost every publisher in New York, he was so fortunate as to find a capitalist—one Mr Otto Kahn—who advanced him the money necessary for the production of the book, which he then proceeded to issue to the public in the States at prices varying from 5 to 50 dollars. It was cheaply produced in Germany and was published by the author from 29 Waverley Place, N Y C. According to his statement made in 1925 to Lord Alfred Douglas he was successful in disposing of 40,000 copies of this book, which justified the latter in saying that Harris must have made a fortune out of a biography to which he, Lord Alfred, took the strongest

exception. It was indeed almost more cruel towards him than towards Wilde, but unfortunately for Harris he had not in Douglas a dead man to slander, but a gentleman of fighting instincts and very much alive. A man from the country where the thistle is an emblem and the *nemo me impune lacessit* is a slogan.

When one approaches Frank Harris, or his concerns, one becomes swathed in a miasma of mendacity and every single statement of his, one realizes, has to be regarded with suspicion, is *sujet à caution*. It seems rather difficult to believe his oft-repeated statement that already in 1922 he had sold 40,000 copies of the book. One has or ought to have considerable respect for the *crassa Minerva* of the Americans, for one knows that if wooden nutmegs and gold bricks do occasionally find purchasers among them, they are as a nation shrewd business-men and it is not easy to imagine 40,000 solid citizens parting with from 5 to 50 dollars apiece for a book which not one single publisher in the States would publish and which was being issued privately by an individual, who was known to have left England under a cloud and as to whose trustworthiness the gravest doubts were warranted. It is all the more difficult to believe the statement because as usual, Frank Harris, either from negligence, or oversight, or mere contempt for his public, has left patent to the most careless observer proofs of his divergence from fact.

In 1922 he told Mr J Stuart Young who was then staying with him in Nice, and who considers his book on Wilde "his old friend's best and noblest effort," that he had sold over 40,000 copies of *The Life and Confessions* and that he "had made three thousand pounds in 'royalties' from it." (The inverted commas to royalties are mine.)

In 1925, he repeats this statement to Lord Alfred Douglas, who was also staying with him.

In 1929, to be exact, on October 15th, I received from

## THE RAISON D'ÊTRE OF THIS BOOK

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Nice, where Harris was still living, a new copy of the biography. I had had considerable difficulty in procuring it. A lady friend in Nice obtained it for me from Harris's flat in the rue Buffault, receiving it in exchange for 125 francs from a "pretty lady, very pleasant." It was impossible for me, though I was aware of Harris's address, to communicate with him directly. I was the last person in the world to whom he would have sold a copy of his book, though already at that time his circumstances were very unprosperous and a very large stock of unsold copies of the work were stacked up in his apartment.

I knew all about the book, which I had read in the seventh edition of its translation into French by Henry D. Davray and Madeleine Vernon published in 1928 by the publishers of *Le Mercure de France*. I had recognized many passages borrowed from my own books on Wilde and I was curious to see to what extent Frank Harris had copied my *ipsissima verba*.

From the dates on the title-pages of the two volumes it would appear that the book I had received in 1929 had been printed in 1918. This must be the date of the second printing. The first edition was produced in America in 1916. It is difficult to believe that if Harris had sold 40,000 copies of a book published in 1916 he would have continued to issue copies of the 1918 printing without any mention of the enormous sale it had enjoyed. I am presuming the German printers stereotyped all the pages, even the title-pages, and that consequently no change in the date was made. But the fact that the work was printed in Germany is announced on the title-page by means of a common india-rubber stamp in purple letters. This, no doubt, was done in compliance with some Federal law on imported printed matter. Harris having no objection to defacing his title-pages, was it only modesty that prevented him from using another purple-ink india-



rubber stamp to inform the 1929 buyers of this work that though dated 1918 it was the 40,000th of the book? He took out his U.S.A. copyright in 1916 as mentioned on the back of the title-page of my copy.

On the back fly-leaf of Vol. 2 there is pasted a yellow leaflet advertising, as from the rue du Helder, Paris, the "Works of Frank Harris" in which my copy of the biography is described as the "Tenth and First complete edition"

In the dossier about Frank Harris which I have been collecting for over twenty years, I find a letter dated June 5th, 1921, addressed to me by a gentleman residing in California, which seems to go to confirm the falsity of Harris's statement that at that time he was making the income that such a sale as he boasted about would have provided.

. I have just been having an argument [writes this correspondent] with Mr Harris over a sale. It seems he offered me a *de luxe* copy, handsomely bound, of the first edition of his book the *Life and Confessions of Oscar Wilde*, together with a facsimile letter of Alfred Douglas, the book to contain a great many of his personal remarks as well. Furthermore, he said he was very loath to part with this copy, but if I specially wanted it, would take fifty dollars for it. I ordered the books. When they came, I was very much disappointed, because what he referred to as his personal remarks was confined to one small paragraph scrawled in pencil at the foot of the appendix. I sent the books back to him post-haste and demanded my money back—which was a very foolish thing to do, because Mr Harris then said the books were not sent to me on approval and that he was holding them to my order. After waiting a week or so, I wired him to return me the books and Douglas's letter at my expense. Since then I have heard nothing.

There seemed to be here something worse than I had expected from Harris and so I was glad when, on July 9th of the same year, I received a second letter from my correspondent in Del Rey telling me that he had received the books back from Harris. He said "The bindings are beautiful, red

morocco." He goes on to give me a copy of Alfred Douglas's facsimile letter which was included in the deal. It was apparently not published in the 1916 edition but appears in the 1918 issue printed in Germany. This is the famous "Charlie" letter—which might equally well have been known as the "Robert" letter inasmuch as Lord Alfred tells his friend that he is looking me up. The Charlie in question was, as Douglas proved, a perfectly proper and desirable companion. The letter was written in rather extravagant terms certainly (which can, of course, be attributed to the writer's poignant distress and his desire to comfort and console), but only very evil-minded people could see in it the suggestion that the malicious Harris wished to convey. I only refer to it here just to show the nature of Harris's traffickings and how hard up he must have been to be forced to sell his own copy of his book with such a premium thrown in. Having this in mind it is difficult to believe that his book had had the enormous circulation which he claimed for it.

Unfortunately, however, there can be no doubt that the foreign translations of the book have had a very wide sale in Europe. Davray claims for the French version, perpetrated by him and Madame Vernon, that as a commercial proposition this book has been and is more successful and remunerative than a "best-seller" novel, a *roman à succès*. In the *Mercure de France* for March 1st, 1928, he quotes a number of enthusiastic reviews of *The Life and Confessions*, many of them signed by people whose names really are of significance in French literature.

What is of more importance, however, is that the book has been regarded as a truthful portrait of Oscar Wilde and an accurate account of his career by various recent biographers, who have drawn on it in every way in combination with my own three books for the purposes of their compilations on Oscar Wilde. Monsieur L. F. Choisy, Professor at the

University of Geneva, for instance, who in 1927 published through Perrin & Cie a long book about him, makes free use of Harris's statements as facts in Wilde's career.

There is no doubt that much of what Dr. Renier and André Gide have published about Wilde would never have been written but for Harris's book

In October 1931 M. Léon Lemonnier published through *La Nouvelle Revue Critique* a Life of Oscar Wilde which has been both well reviewed and well received, and which should be of value to future biographers, as he has chronological exactitude and has been at some pains in collecting new facts about his subject. It contains notably one chapter entitled "La Condamnation d'Oscar Wilde et l'Opinion Française (1895-1897)" which is noteworthy as it gives a review with exact dates of the more important articles published about Wilde after his arrest and after his trial. In the introductory chapter of his biography he admits once for all his indebtedness to Harris's biography and mine, making ample use of these two books and of my other writings on Wilde, but proceeds to use our various statements without further indicating which work he is quoting from. His biography accordingly contains many statements transcribed from *The Life and Confessions* which are given in the narrative as facts, but which are sheer lies.

In other countries also writers on Oscar Wilde have made use of Harris's "facts," which are not facts at all but perfidious slanders, and there is no doubt that unless the utter falsity of Harris's book is once and for all made patent, it will be used by future writers as a genuine description of the man and a veracious record of his acts and conversations. Wilde suffered enough in his lifetime and it is certainly unseemly that his lamentable and premature death should not have released him from his shameful pillory. Granted that the evil that men do lives after them, but let it be the evil that

they did do and not what they are represented as having done by self-seeking chroniclers even when these are able to mask their perfidious purposes behind a camouflage of warm friendship.

Harris has been successful in the main objects he had in mind when, after leaving England financially embarrassed, with all credit exhausted, and under a cloud, he decided to write the life of Wilde. He made money out of it, though not as much as he would have people believe, and what was perhaps nearly as important in his estimation, he emerged from the transaction with the very highest reputation as a biographer. In England the leading papers, such as *The Times* and the *Athenæum*, proclaimed it a masterpiece, but others—for instance, Upton Sinclair and Reginald Turner (to mention only two of several thurifers)—went even further and hailed *The Life and Confessions* as the best biography that has ever been written since biographers were, and, improving on Lord Macaulay, classed Harris as the first of Biographers (the majuscule is his L'dship's), Boswell, hardly worth placing as second and the rest not worth mentioning, in other words (borrowing his L'dship's simile from the race-course—*flat* racing, I would suggest in this instance) put "Fakir" first, "Eclipse" a very bad second and the rest nowhere.

In France, to judge from the Press-notices, which H. D. Davray prints in *Le Mercure de France* of March 1st, 1928, the reception of the French version was an even more triumphant one. Henri de Régnier (whose election to the French Academy I predicted years before he became a member of that distinguished but hardly literary company), having met Wilde once or twice in Paris before the fall, gave a very fine picture of him in his *Figures et Caractères* and describes Harris's portrayal of Wilde as "the truest and most life-like portrait which has been drawn of him." I doubt that when Harris, full of wine and libel, sat down to his table to indite his fame-

and money-producing book and yielding to his fondness for classical quotations, exclaimed "*Populus vult decipi, decipiatur*," he ever imagined that here *populus* would include not only a distinguished French Academician but a large number of other eminent writers

These tributes to his skill as a biographer and as a photographic limner would please Harris greatly, but where his satisfaction would overflow his cup of joy would be in the appreciations of himself as a MAN. Reading these tributes to him as reprinted by H. D. Davray I cannot help recalling that scene in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, where Mrs. Todgers's boarders serenade Pecksniff not only as an Artist but as a Man. And indeed in his self-seeking, his pretence of friendship where only a fierce desire to exploit existed, his unctuous moralizings, indeed in his very lachrimosity (he weeps throughout the two volumes over his "friend's" woes till almost every page of the books has its watermark) there is much in him to remind us of Dickens's masterly creation.

We are asked to admire his bravery in penning his denunciation of English society, published abroad where he was out of the reach of the law, and of his equal courage in proclaiming himself the friend of such an outcast, at the time when the outcast was that no longer, when he had become a European celebrity and when to be able to say that one had "seen Oscar plain," and more than once, in his very lifetime, sounded not only "strange and true" but a distinction. What fourteen years previously had been a stigma and a reproach had become almost a recommendation.

We are told as to the artist, Harris, that "he is not only one of the most beautiful writers who do honour to contemporary Anglo-Saxon literature," but as to Harris, the man, that he is "one of the loftiest, straightest and most independent characters living" and "a fine specimen of superior humanity."

Again. "Nor do we speak of the courage that Mr. Harris

shows in the judgement of men and their laws, nor of his heart so nobly passionate that the moment one opens his book one feels it beating."

And again "There is nobody having read this admirable work who does not feel a deep admiration and a sincere affection at the same time for Oscar Wilde and for Frank Harris himself. . Mr Frank Harris has written an admirable book which gives as much honour to his intelligence as to his heart "

And again " a complete narrative, the poignant and pathetic labour of ten years of a good fellow and a brave man" (*Un brave homme et un homme brave*) . "A strong, a very strong personality Mr Frank Harris . . . When you have read *The Life and Confessions of Oscar Wilde* you will feel the highest esteem for the character of Mr Frank Harris " And so on Harris comes out splendidly from his own account of his relations to and dealings with Oscar Wilde, but what about Oscar himself?

George Bernard Shaw, we read from his own pen, feels justified, after reading the whole two volumes at one sitting, in drawing from it the conclusion that Wilde ended and died as "an unproductive drunkard and swindler," besides having during his career as shown on Harris's authority displayed quite a number of most deplorable characteristics

But we will come to Shaw later . Here we are concerned with the impressions about Wilde which French writers of eminence derived from Harris's description of him and his way of living . I will give a typical pronouncement . It comes from the pen of Maître José Théry, a leading French barrister who is always briefed in any big literary case and whose writings in *Le Matin* are read with high appreciation . I will preface my citation, however, with the remark that it seems to be extraordinary that a man like Théry, accustomed to sifting evidence and the very last man in the world to form an

opinion on the bare, unsubstantiated statement of a solitary witness, about whose trustworthiness and credibility he knows nothing, should have printed such a conclusion about Oscar Wilde without taking the slightest trouble to inquire into the authenticity of Harris's facts. Théry has, of course, a telephone in his chambers and might easily have called up the Paris Préfecture de Police with the special request to be put into direct communication with Monsieur Chiappe, the Prefect himself. Being thus in conversation with the head of the Paris police, he might have asked a question or two, which Chiappe, who is a lover of literature, would have been all the more delighted to answer (speaking to so distinguished a lawyer) that he was as a young man personally acquainted with Wilde and saw him in Paris—they both frequented the same café—many times during Wilde's last miserable years there.

In the meanwhile here is Théry against Oscar Wilde after the mere reading of Harris's concoctions: "How fine a book!" he writes. "No novel, no drama evolved from the imagination equals it in grandeur and in interest!" He continues by saying that until he read this book he had conceived that Wilde's tragedy finished with his imprisonment, with a disgraced and tortured and penitent Wilde.

"But," he adds, "—and here is what is really dramatic and new—after the disgrace, after the torture, Oscar Wilde, speedily abandoning his feeble wish to amend and to make reparation, plunges into vice anew, indefatigably pursues his moral and physical degradation, becomes sordidly debauchee, becomes a liar, a swindler (*escroc*), a drunkard, accumulating on his head every possible infamy as though it were imperative that his ruin should be so complete that not the least room should be left for sympathy and pity."

He concludes: "Had he, in his conversations, imagined such a tragedy? I do not know, but one can say that he turned

his life into the most terrible drama that can be imagined. After ruining a splendid existence, after suffering the worst humiliations and the cruellest treatment, at the very moment when the martyr's crown of those who have been unjustly executed is about to descend on his head, he thrusts this crown aside and proceeds to a fresh outbreak whereby all chances of sympathy and pity shall be destroyed. He wishes to make no amends. He makes one think of an executed criminal coming out of his tomb to trample underfoot the flowers scattered by pious hands over his resting-place "

I remember wondering when I read Théry's article, what Harris, having read it also, might be thinking in his sunny apartment on the Riviera, and I was forced to come to the conclusion that it probably pleased him very much as likely to increase materially that month's *droits d'auteur*, to be divided between himself and the translators. I should say that not the vestige of a qualm beset him, that not the faintest tinge of blush-red mounted to his cheeks while, busy with brown paper and string, he was making up his pornographic parcels for the promptest international airplane delivery



## CHAPTER II

### THE ROMANCE OF THE "WILDE ROSE"

I AM afraid I wondered less what Henry D. Davray—I know nothing about Madame Madeleine Vernon or *que diable allatt-elle faire dans cette galère*—may have thought when he had realized from Maître Théry's article what sort of an Oscar Wilde he, Davray, had presented to the French public. Probably even more keenly than Harris did he appreciate the "pulling" power of this description of the book and its hero. For the simple reason that, financially, he was even more interested in the sales of the French version than Harris himself, as he would have his share not only in the royalties earned, but a part also of the publisher's profits, for Davray has capital invested in the *Mercure de France* publishing business. Still, one could not help asking oneself whether he did not hesitate as Wilde's whilom friend and beneficiary before publishing in the periodical issued by his firm, the extract from which I have quoted above and which represents Oscar Wilde as a sordid debauchee, a liar, a drunkard and a swindler. Surely Davray knew that Wilde was none of these things. He used to frequent him in Paris during the period when, according to Harris, Wilde was developing these characteristics and he must have known how utterly he had been misrepresented. He was twenty years younger than Wilde when they were so much together in 1898, and he had not then particularly distinguished himself in any way, nor was it till two years later that the first of his literary labours (a translation of Sir Edmund Gosse's *Modern English Literature*) attracted any

attention to his name. It was, therefore, only Wilde's native kindness and—not to mince words—his ready condescension that procured Davray's access to the author of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, and the latter's acceptance of his offer to put it into French prose and to secure its publication in the same *Mercure de France* in which thirty years later, by his deliberate agency, his friend and literary sponsor was so shamefully to be pilloried

Davray gives some account of his relations with Wilde in 1898, when they were working together on this translation. He makes the curious claim that Wilde asked him to do the translation. He also publishes some of Wilde's letters to him. All this in the book entitled *Oscar Wilde La Tragédie Finale*, published by the *Mercure de France*

It was through the Davray translation of *The Life and Confessions* that I first became acquainted with Harris's iniquitous book. It did not highly impress me with the translator's intelligence or knowledge of literature. Davray as a Parisian must have known that Harris's account of Wilde's behaviour in Paris was an utterly impossible one, that the squalid story told in the chapter headed "Une Grande Passion Romantique" was an invention which is almost as big an insult to the Paris Préfecture and the Paris Head Military Command as it is to poor Wilde—as I am at pains to demonstrate farther on—and that many other of the scenes laid in Paris are fakes which should need no rebuttal to a Parisian of ordinary *nous* and honesty. Even the densest *gobe-mouche* would refuse to believe that Esterhazy at luncheon with Wilde and Harris at Durand's publicly confessed in the hearing of all and sundry that he was the author of the *bordereau*, or that Émilienne d'Alençon would hurry from her loge at Olympia to sup with a *clochard* and a vague journalist on a mere whistle from the latter. And apart from this Davray must have known that Wilde was in no respects the man that Harris represented.

Yet he translates and publishes this book knowing it to be full of every kind of slander and malicious or idiotic fabrication, and to further the sale of his version quotes the opinion of high-placed but still more egregious *gobe-mouches*, such as Maître Théry, who have at least the excuse that they were not acquainted with Harris or his record and did not know Wilde

With the translation as such I have no particular fault to find, and was interested to see how passages lifted by Harris almost verbally from my books read in the French. In passing such passages in review I came by the way on one which Harris had annexed from me—the passage where I write of Balzac's comments, in *La Cousine Bette*, on those semi-artists who *passent leur vie à se parler*. In his transcript of this passage Harris gave as his own a quotation from Balzac which I had referred to, and prints it without quotation marks as one of his own clever remarks. Davray, whose literary achievements fill nearly half a column of *Who's Who* and have brought him several decorations, translates this passage and leaves it to be gathered by the illiterate reader that it was Harris and not Balzac who penned the famous axiom

Le travail constant est la loi de l'art, comme celle de la vie, car l'art c'est la création idéalisée

In the Davray translation (Vol II, p 139) this axiom, borrowed from Balzac by Harris, through Sherard, appears as Harris's own wise remark

Créer constamment est la première condition de l'art, comme c'est aussi la première condition de la vie

Harris plagiarizing Balzac, and Davray passing it on to the French this is one reason why I said that Davray shows a certain ignorance of French literature

Further to aggravate his offence against Wilde and to

exploit the British market with his book, Harris readily agreed in 1925 to write a new preface to the 1918 edition, in which he undertook to withdraw his monstrous charges against Alfred Douglas and to attribute the origin of all these charges to the malice of Oscar Wilde and the perfidy of Robert Ross.

A copy of this fresh attack by Harris on Wilde in emendation of his *Life and Confessions* was sent to George Bernard Shaw directly it came out, as I was informed some years ago by a correspondent, who naively adds "He could, doubtless, if he would, contradict *some* of Harris's lies" *Bien au contraire* It did not affect his original opinion on the excellence of his friend's portrait of Wilde in the least, as is proved by the letter which he wrote to Alfred Douglas and which the latter included in his preface to the new edition of his Autobiography.

Now it is just these pronouncements by George Bernard Shaw—these imprimaturs which he delivers to Frank Harris on his biography of Wilde in general and on his portrayal of the man in particular—that have finally roused me to issue this book

Because, though Shaw does not seem to have much political influence in England, his word on matters literary gets a tremendous hearing And the same the world over The log to which he puts his hands rolls forward with a mighty impetus And though Harris has told us that Shaw is not going to survive otherwise than as a personality in the future, it is quite certain that for a good long time to come, posterity, while admiring the man, will also allow itself to be guided by the literary critic and counsellor So that unless Harris's book is definitely and effectively exposed as a worthless fabrication and his portrait of Wilde (from which the impressions recorded above are derived by people who either did not know him at all, like Maître Théry, or had only met him five or six times, like Shaw) is shown to be an utterly false misrepre-

sentation, physical, mental and moral, of this pre-eminent man, future students of English literature will be induced into grievous error and injustice and a high offence against the Republic of Letters allowed to become permanent in its malignant effect

I am not attacking a dead man I am dealing with what I consider a vile attack on another dead man, for whom I had a great admiration and a sincere affection I explain farther on what were my relations with Harris and that there was much in him that I liked and admired But now that he is dead, this evil that he has done, this cruel traducement, under a mask of friendship, of a great and unhappy man, is not going to live after him if I can possibly help it As long as Harris was alive, I allowed him to enjoy in peace to the last minute of his life the benefits in esteem and money that accrued to him from this evil act of his, all the more readily because I heard he was not very prosperous, that the man I remembered as buoyant, of radio-active vitality and an Ajax-like attitude towards the world, had come in his old age to no pleasant Latium, but "frail, feeble and given to somnolence," was fighting an up-hill battle for the existence (on lines of luxury certainly) of himself and the devoted wife whom he cherished. His offences against me in his book only once prompted me to a very mild protest in the *Mercure de France* (May 1st, 1928) This was in the form of a letter I wrote to M André Maurois who had been violently attacked in that review by Frank Harris (April 15th, 1928) in connection with the ridiculous charges of plagiarism brought against Maurois by a writer called Auriant. Harris, backing up this Auriant, had addressed a letter about André Maurois to the editor, of which one can say it was penned with even more "deliberate, studied and wounding insolence" (to quote G B S) than the very reprehensible letter that Wilde wrote to the *Pall Mall Gazette* on September 22nd, 1894 (when his mental condition would

not have perplexed any psychiatrist for one single moment) about T P O'Connor Maurois answered this letter, in which Harris had accused him of plagiarizing in Maurois's *Études Anglaises* certain passages in *The Life and Confessions*, and quoted a letter I had written to him when the charges by Auriant in connection with the *Études Anglaises* had first been made. In this letter I had told Maurois not to worry about the matter, for that several of the passages which he was accused of having stolen from Frank Harris had been taken by Frank Harris from one or other of my books about Wilde, that all that I had written about my late friend, having been written for the purpose of trying to rehabilitate him in public opinion, belonged to the public and such authors as cared to make use of it. I added "I have never protested against any borrowings in the matter of Wilde, and almost every book that has been written about this unhappy man has proceeded from my writings, but that does not mean to say that those who have borrowed from me (*mes emprunteurs*) have any right to claim the ownership of my souvenirs." Harris never answered this letter of André Maurois's, which also contained a letter from Sir Edmund Gosse telling Maurois "that English readers view with indignation the perfidious attacks which are made on you," and assuring him of the admiration with which the British public regards his treatment of English themes, especially with reference to his critical faculty. Harris no doubt had imagined me to be long dead and, like Aurélien Scholl when the demise of Alphonse Karr was announced, would have exclaimed "Quoi? Encore!" if he had heard I had died. Harris prudently observed my caveat and remained mumchance and so I left him alone.

That I resent Shaw's statement that Harris's book has wiped out all preceding biographies because this may affect the sales of my books is a suggestion which I answer merely by shrugging my shoulders. I have never tried to make one

penny profit out of these writings about my dead friend, and in view of the expenses incurred in their production should have had a deficit to face, the sums paid me for their copyrights falling short of the total of my expenses, if certain payments from foreign publishers for translation rights had not just about squared accounts

The idea of any pecuniary benefits from such a source, let Zoilus know, is abhorrent to my nature. I do not suppose that he will understand, but there is the simple irrefutable fact. With regard to that other profit which accrues to the writer from work well done, the author of a biography of a man with a story like that of Wilde would be a fool should he look for much else than contumely and reprobation, especially when, as in my case, little more than a year had passed over his dishonoured grave before I took the pen in hand determined to present to the world a different picture of him than the public conception of the man who had described himself with his own pen as seated between Gilles de Retz and the Marquis de Sade in the lowest depths of Malebolge

When I read that description to-day I think it is a pity Wilde did not live to see the complete rehabilitation of the author of *Justine*, and his ever-growing influence on the trend of British fiction. He would assuredly have revised this sentence as indicating the loathsome depths to which he had been hurled

I wrote that first book of mine at a time when I did not expect to live to finish it. That was thirty-four years ago. I wrote it because I considered it an act of immanent justice to do so. It had its effect, a most unexpected and striking effect, and induced many people in different parts of the world, but mainly in Germany and France, to reconsider their judgement on the poor outcast in the grave in Bagneux Cemetery. A direct consequence was the publication first in Germany and afterwards in England of *De Profundis*, with all that that

meant to Wilde's rehabilitation as a writer. And then fifteen years later comes Frank Harris, who had failed very justly as a journalist because of his improbity in that employ and very unjustly as an author because the literary career is a lottery, and because for reasons that nobody has ever yet fathomed it is rarely that the prizes of success and fame go to the most meritorious. This ruined, bankrupt, disappointed man, who had seen his fine efforts in literary achievement passed over with contemptuous indifference and who had no other means of getting the large sums of money necessary for the purchase of the "mud-honey" of life, without which existence seemed to him undesirable and impossible, resolved to win notoriety where fame had been denied him, to make money in a profession which had led him to bankruptcy and imprisonment—and so, wretched and sick at heart, I have no doubt, deliberately turned to pornography. I do not believe that until then he had ever had the idea of exploiting his acquaintance with Oscar Wilde for literary purposes. At a time when a public expression of opinion on his part might have helped the prisoner and the social outcast, he preserved the strictest silence. There was no tribute from him after his mournful death. Then the way in which my writings were received even in England and the phenomenal success of *De Profundis* suggested to him that there might be fame and what was really all he wanted, money, in a work on Wilde. The idea waxed within him and when everything else had failed and he had been forced to leave England *sans esprit de retour*, he determined to put it into execution. He no doubt gave the question of the way of treating his subject the most careful consideration. What would be the best way of making the book a best-seller and at the same time win for himself, Harris, the approbation that is not refused to the self-sacrificing friend? He decided to depict Oscar Wilde as having been a moral leper from his boyhood upwards and to



reserve to himself the rôle of Father Damien. He decided that his work should be one of veiled pornographic tendency, for he calculated, I am afraid with reason, that the large public did not want an apology for a man of genius who congenitally was predestined to homosexuality and by a disease contracted before he reached his prime was, before his death, to afford another deplorable example of the ghastly mental, moral and physical ruin which that disease effects in those on whom it has set its claws. He estimated shrewdly that the public did not want a martyr Wilde, that what it wanted was a depraved offender, ruthless in his vile purposes and deliberate in their fulfilment. This quality was to be the *pièce de résistance* of the literary table d'hôte to which guests were to sit down at five dollars "per," but there were to be all kinds of trimmings and kickshaws to glut even the most voracious appetite. There was not to be the slightest restraint on his part in concocting his book. Wilde was not for one moment to be considered. The book had got to sell. It must be sensational *au diable*. He must confess to him, Harris. He must admit vile practices and he must try to defend them out of the stores of his scholarship and philosophy against Harris's erudition and morality. This would afford the author many opportunities of displaying his knowledge of the classics, or at least to dazzle his readers with its cogency and extent. This would be all to the good. It would put him, Harris, in the most favourable light as regards normality and moral observance, while blackening Wilde to the utmost. The consideration that not a single person who had even only a casual acquaintance with Wilde would for one moment believe in the authenticity of these "confessions," because any such person would know that even on his deathbed, when every fibre in his tortured brain and body was straining for the soothing balm of absolution, he would have found it impossible to speak of these things or to admit such nameless offences—

even at the cost of seeing the Eucharist withdrawn, is one that would not trouble Harris at all. The book had got to sell. It was not written for Wilde's few friends and acquaintances. It was written for the large moneyed public which would not mind spending five dollars to be titillated and even thrilled. The confessions, Wilde being dead, could never be disproved. In the Catholic Church there is some rule that the secrecy of the confessional is inviolable. That is the Church's affair. He, Harris, wasn't a priest and if for some extraordinary reason his friend chose to select him, Harris, as a Father Confessor, bound by no rules of secrecy, and knowing him to be a publicist eager for "copy," to make to him appalling avowals, which his lips would certainly have refused to frame, even if the very salvation of his immortal soul had been at stake—well, that was his friend's affair. And see how on velvet he was and how "good he was sitting,"—that friend was dead and muted for ever. The book had got to sell. That he, Harris, might be blamed for printing conversations which consign this same dead friend to eternal infamy! Well, that is an affair of etiquette and sentiment and such considerations cannot be allowed to interfere with the success of a sound and promising business proposition.

Fortunately, it is possible to prove that these conversations never took place and that the "confessions" are purely imaginary. That is one of the purposes of my book. Another is to show that as a biography it is untrustworthy. Harris, beyond previously published works on Wilde such as my three, Gide's *Mémoires*, some newspaper files and so on, had little material to work upon, though of course he had a great many personal souvenirs of Wilde, for which, however, he seems to have found little room in his book. The first volume is almost entirely made up from my books and the newspaper accounts of the Wilde trials. It is in the main an indictment of English society in the nineties. It is full of misstatements and slanders.

The second volume, which has been described as an indictment of Wilde, is almost all pure "fake." His imagination here before one's eyes acquires more and more strength as it rolls along. He heaps Pelions of fabrication on Ossas of malignance. His contempt for the public he is duping becomes greater and greater as the clumsiness of his inventions becomes more and more apparent. And he succeeds in duping such intelligentsia as Henri de Régnier, Maître Théry and George Bernard Shaw, to say nothing of Upton Sinclair. All these have given him brevets of excellence both as a writer and as a friend, while Shaw has instructed the world that his portrait of Wilde is to be taken as by far the best portrayal that has been given of the man, though he does not say whether Harris's additions to his description as set forth in the "New Preface" have in any way modified this opinion which was delivered when he had only read the book itself.

Among the many astonishing superhuman feats that this superman has accomplished in his long and strenuous lifetime, surely this is the most amazing. At one sitting—"at one stroke," he writes—he reads through a biography in two volumes forming a work of 612 pages, with 30 lines to a page and from 7 to 9 words to a line, that is to say a work of 146,880 words. He reads through this work of 146,880 words obviously with the greatest care and attention because he knows that he is to express an opinion on it which will be promptly given to the world by the author of the book, who knows with what attention the world listens to Shaw's judgments and with what almost reverential eyes it looks to him for light and guidance. Well, he tells us so himself and it is therefore an indisputable fact—he reads this book of nearly 150,000 words through at one stroke and with a full sense of his responsibility finds himself justified in handing down the opinion that the portrait given in it by Frank Harris of Oscar Wilde and the record of his life, are those by which Wilde's

memory will have to stand or fall. He then, within ten minutes of laying down Harris's book, takes up his pen and proceeds to write Harris a letter of over 6,000 words on the subject, giving his own reminiscences of Wilde and recording *inter alia* that he has gathered from the book that Wilde died an "unproductive drunkard and swindler" From the same book Maître Théry had gathered that also and a good deal more. But perhaps Shaw did not wish to go as far as the French lawyer, at any rate in his letter to Harris, which he knew would be at once broadcast all over the world He may have thought that perhaps that would not be a nice or a kind thing to do about a fellow-countryman and brother-craftsman He may have reflected that perhaps the man had suffered enough in his life-time, that he had left friends who mourned him . . . descendants *que sais-je?*

Had it been anybody else but George Bernard Shaw, I should have imagined that as there is reading *and* reading, his annihilating conviction about Oscar Wilde, as derived from this book, showed that he could only have read this ponderous work "at one shot" by reverting in a green old age to those "smelling the paper-knife" methods of perusal which he must inevitably have practised in the lean *Flegel-Jahre* when he was reviewing novels for the newspapers

For Harris's two volumes no paper-knife (and this is a redeeming feature) is needed and so we have to imagine Shaw religiously turning over page after page of the six hundred and twelve and reading each page from top to bottom He would thus fatally come upon certain passages and certain descriptions which might, one would think, have made the severe but just critic and censor (fully sensible of his great responsibility) come to grips with the kindly and recognizant log-roller Since he allows me to suppose from his letter to Harris that he did me the high honour of reading my books on Wilde, which he admits were not so bad but which have since been obliterated,

wiped out, abolished, annihilated by Harris's biography, he must surely have recognized even in the first volume the effrontery with which Harris has bodily transferred to his pages the "purple patches" of which I was proudest. On the very last page of all in this volume is the Verestschagin-like picture I painted of the mob in the Old Bailey after Wilde's final trial and conviction. It was just the sort of literary croquis which I should have fancied would have impressed an artist like Shaw and have lingered in his memory, and that finding it reproduced in Harris's book he might have paused . . . hesitated      wondered      doubted

All the more so that before reaching that passage he could not but have decided that Harris's account of the last scene in the Central Criminal Court was a mere transcription of current newspaper reports and that—which is a fact—Harris was not in the Court at all at any time during that fatal afternoon of May 25th, 1895, and certainly did not witness the scene in the Old Bailey which he borrowed from me. He convicts himself of the falsehood of describing himself as having been present during this poignant episode by one careless little slip, by a single word in his description.

The judge, snarling and spitting out his words, has just pronounced sentence. Then, writes Harris

"Wilde ROSE "

When he wrote this, it is possible he was visualizing some mediæval scene—a cowed and scowling justiciary speaking for Doom, a sputtering torch alone illuminating the black night; a wincing prisoner forced to his knees to listen to the awful sentence, then, when it has been pronounced, staggering to his feet.

Surely Harris in London and Davray in Paris must have witnessed the repelling scene where one man passes sentence on another, and must be aware that—"though by the courtesy of the judge the prisoner was accommodated with a chair in

the dock during the proceedings"—an able-bodied convict has to stand to hear the judgement

"Wilde ROSE."

Surely here was a statement which might have made Shaw wonder . hesitate doubt Every slightest movement of every person engaged in that hideous scene etched itself in mordant acid on the memory tablets of anyone who was present and witnessed the sordid and simiesque proceedings So here by this one little slip Harris proves that he was not in court at all, and that it was not to his memory but to his imagination that he went to describe this scene, and this might have made even his most benevolent recensionist wonder in what other scenes the same process of fabrication had been indulged in by this latest of Wilde's biographers

They are, alas! many and manifold It will be my painful duty to detail them, though I shall not always be able so flagrantly to convict Harris of falsehood out of his own mouth, but in some instances have to fall back on irrefutable documentary evidence

I am afraid the only conclusion that one can come to is that George Bernard Shaw has shown himself in the matter of this biography of Wilde by his friend and thurifer, Harris, to have been only another illustrious victim of a literary impostor

He is not in bad company in this respect He is as much the dupe of Harris as Walpole was (or was not) of Chatterton, and as Napoleon and Goethe and Gottfried von Herder and Lady Wilde were of a certain Dr Macpherson

### CHAPTER III

#### EXALTED DUPES OF LITERARY IMPOSTURES

LADY WILDE had been so fascinated by *Ossian* and so completely bemused by the all-cozening Macpherson, that when she came to select Christian names for her second son it was to this spurious poem that she turned. *Ossian* it will be remembered was the son of Fingal and father of Oscar. Whence the names Oscar Fingal for her baby boy

Thus one impostor presided over the baptismal fount at which Wilde was ushered into this world. It will be mine to show that the stirrup-cup for his ride down the dim vista of posterity was handed him by another

I must confess that when I came to write my *Life of Oscar Wilde*, I was in ignorance of the reason why these names were selected. Yet that book has been described as an "authoritative" biography. I can only say here in exculpation for such a careless oversight, that neither Oscar Wilde, nor his mother, nor any one of his family ever referred in my presence to the source whence Lady Wilde had taken these names. I had never read *Ossian* because Dr Samuel Johnson had warned me against doing so, just as I am afraid hundreds and thousands of people the world over may be induced to read Harris's book in centuries to come, because George Bernard Shaw has urged them to do so.

As a matter of fact I stupidly attributed Lady Wilde's selection of her son's first Christian name to the fact that before his birth she had travelled in Sweden with Dr Wilde, and there had come to know Oscar of Sweden, Duke of Ostergotland and a poet of parts, who afterwards became King

Jane Francesca Elgee, Speranza, Lady Wilde, was of a mental composition which made her predestined from birth to fall a victim to the literary wiles of Macpherson, who in 1826 (the year in which Lady Wilde was born) had been comfortably lying in cold marble in Westminster Abbey for thirty years past. She was romantic to the point of *Schwarmeres*. Macpherson's fabrication so greatly delighted her that she went to it for names for her son. That she should so have been duped by the "translator" of Ossian implies not the faintest reflection on her intelligence or critical faculty, for amongst her fellow-victims had been Madame de Stael, who in 1800 wrote with wild enthusiasm about the beauties of the phantom Scotch bard.

With regard to Macpherson's *Ossian*, it is a curious fact that literary impostures have always found their readiest dupes amongst the greatest of men. The translation of Ossian was a striking example. Talleyrand tells us "General Bonaparte adores Ossian, whose sublime beauties transport him high above earth." When later the general became emperor, he pensioned Baour-Lormian who had published an imitation of Ossian's poem. And if Châteaubriand ardently espoused the Johnsonian side of the controversy and declared Macpherson an impostor, it was because Châteaubriand, who considered himself Bonaparte's equal, always tried to gainsay him.

Johann Gottfried von Herder gives Fingal's son a high place in his *Stimmen der Voelker*, and Melchiorre Cesarotti, of Naples, the translator of Homer, no doubt at the instigation of Napoleon, whose favourite he was, also translated Macpherson and declared *Ossian* much superior to the bard of the *Iliad*.

The great Goethe was no less enthusiastic. "*Ossian*," he wrote, "has supplanted Homer in my heart." His *Werther* is, we know, liberally flavoured with Macpherson *Ersatz*.

This list of illustrious people who were duped in this matter of *Ossian* may afford some consolation to George Bernard Shaw



should he ever come to reconsider his testimonial on the *Life and Confessions* which he delivered to Harris, who has made such use of it in making hundreds and thousands of other dupes. We are all convinced of Shaw's entire probity and it is evident therefore that he considered this biography a truthful record of facts and Harris's portrait of Wilde a life-like one, that he fully believed in the authenticity and genuineness of the alleged confessions put into Wilde's mouth and, finally, that he was convinced of the sincerity of Harris's assertions of deep affection for his subject.

One could not but conjecture that after reading Harris's "New Preface," written in collaboration with Lord Alfred Douglas, Shaw must have realized how he had been cozened into giving his high imprimatur to an unvarnished and defamatory narrative, for in this preface Harris proclaims himself to have been duped throughout by Wilde whom he then describes as a "malicious liar." The "New Preface," accordingly, if Harris is to be believed, entirely destroys the value of the book as a biography, for if Wilde were indeed a malicious liar what reason had anyone for believing in the truth of the loathsome confessions which form so large a part of the biography?

However, Shaw's letter to Alfred Douglas proves that he persists in his admiration for and belief in Harris and his book, that the "New Preface" has not prompted and never will prompt him to reconsider his decision or to withdraw his certificate of excellence.

One would have fancied, indeed, that Shaw would have been glad after reading the "New Preface" to disbelieve *in toto* that repugnant story about Walter Pater attributed to Wilde by Harris and reported in what he alleges were Wilde's own words at the end of Chapter III. For if it be true that Wilde was a malicious liar, why should a story so particularly malicious, coming from his lips, be credenced? Does Shaw pretend to believe it? Has Harris duped him to the extent of

believing that Wilde would invent such a story about a man for whom he had the greatest admiration and respect? And if he does not believe it, must not this fact suggest to him that he should disbelieve all the rest of Wilde's alleged confessions, by which Wilde's memory is to stand or fall hereafter?

I hold about the *Life and Confessions of Oscar Wilde* exactly the same opinion that Dr Samuel Johnson held about Macpherson's *Ossian* and am decidedly inclined, from what I know both of Oscar Wilde and of Frank Harris, "to pay regard not to what Frank Harris shall say about Oscar Wilde, but to what he shall prove" I consider—I know—his book to be an imposture and the alleged confessions to be almost entirely inventions by Harris and malicious inventions at that And I should marvel at Shaw's credulity had we not so many examples of how easily even great intellects may be bamboozled

I shall now proceed to make my words good and before I close this chapter I hope to prove that in his very first pages Harris convicts himself of having written this book for no other purpose than that of making money by veiled pornography with real men figuring as characters in his sordid romance, and that for the venal object in view there is nothing too base for him to stoop to betrayal of the most sacred duties of friendship, ghoul-like violation of time-honoured graves, fabrication of bolstering evidence and even deliberate forgery when and as required

The fact that Harris's first chapter is a reprint of the newspaper reports of a scandalous trial in Dublin in December, 1864, which chapter is described in the Index of Contents as : "Oscar Wilde's Father and Mother on Trial," which had been so completely forgotten in Dublin that Shaw himself knew nothing about it until—as he writes to Harris—"I read your account," proves from the very first page that Harris's book was not written in any spirit of friendship towards Wilde, but, on the contrary, with the firm determination to use any

incident connected with him or his parents, that might be considered a sensational appeal to the pruriency and sadism of the reading-public, to increase the sales of his biography

The first chapter is a long account of a libel action brought by a Miss Travers against Lady Wilde for damages for defamation in a letter written by Speranza to the plaintiff's father, Dr Travers. In this letter Lady Wilde complained of a blackmailing campaign that his daughter had been carrying on against Sir William, whom she had accused of having debauched her when under an anæsthetic in 1862. Since this alleged occurrence she had been pestering Dr (afterwards Sir William) Wilde with constant demands for "pecuniary compensation," and not being very successful in this enterprise had flooded the town with—as Lady Wilde writes—"offensive placards in which my name is given, and also tracts in which she makes it appear that she has had an intrigue with Sir William Wilde." Though after Dr Wilde had been knighted by Lord Carlisle, the Viceroy, at the conclusion of a chapter of the Knights of St Patrick on March 17th, 1864, Miss Travers had so rancorously intensified her campaign, it had been going on for more than a year and every slightest detail of her charges against the surgeon must have been known at the Castle. These must there have appeared so utterly unfounded and contemptible to the Viceroy's advisers and to H E himself that when dubbing William Wilde knight, he specially stressed that the honour was being conferred on him, *inter alia*, "in recognition of his high professional reputation."

The result of the trial was that the jury awarded Miss Travers one farthing damages. Harris adds that the jury intimated that the farthing should carry costs. "In other words," he writes, "they rated Miss Travers's virtue at the very lowest coin of the realm, while insisting that Sir William Wilde should pay a couple of thousands of pounds for having seduced her." Here Harris shows as little knowledge of civil

procedure as he showed of criminal court regulations. The question of costs is reserved to the judge, who would know that it would be useless to lay them upon the plaintiff, and, well . . . well.

In London to-day Miss Travers would have found herself in the dock at the Old Bailey for having libelled and attempted to blackmail Mr X Harris justifies Miss Travers and vilifies both Sir William and Lady Wilde All this in the service of truth and friendship.

But he is not content with digging up this dead and forgotten scandal He "naturally wished to give us the testimony of some contemporary on the matter," and proceeds to attribute to the late Mr R V Tyrrell, Regius Professor of Greek at T C D, an "excellent and pithy" letter which he alleges was addressed to him, Harris, and in which Tyrrell is represented as writing very rude and unkind things about both Oscar's father and mother, at a time when both had been dead for many years

It is perfectly clear that Professor Tyrrell never wrote Harris any such letter

Shaw would back me up in saying that one of the admirable characteristics of an Irish gentleman is that he never says, or allows to be uttered in his presence—and would sooner cut off his right hand than put down on paper—anything derogatory, or even faintly critical of a woman

I knew Tyrrell I met him in Dublin when I went over there to collect my materials for the Wilde book, and the way he spoke to me about Oscar and his parents renders it utterly impossible for me to believe he would several years later have penned a cruel and insulting letter about the two Besides, apart from his words, the man himself . .

Surely Bernard Shaw must have seen at once that the alleged letter from Tyrrell could only be a malicious invention by Harris. But apparently nothing was to be allowed to disturb

his faith in Harris's credibility and his admiration for the book. He breathes not a suggestion of a hint that Harris ought not to have started his book with defamations of Lady Wilde. He might have remembered what Oscar wrote about his love of and reverence for his mother:

. . . Three more months go over and my mother dies. No one knew how deeply I loved and honoured her. Her death was terrible to me, but I, once a lord of language, have no words in which to express my anguish and my shame. Never even in the most perfect days of my development as an artist could I have found words fit to bear so august a burden, or to move with sufficient stateliness through the purple pageant of my incommunicable woe . . . What I suffered then, and still suffer, is not for pen to write or paper to record. My wife, always kind and gentle to me, rather than that I should hear the news from indifferent lips, travelled, ill as she was, all the way from Genoa to England to break to me herself the tidings of so irreparable, so irredeemable, a loss

*(De Profundis)*

Surely remembering this Shaw must have realized that nothing could have pained Wilde more deeply than such an outrage on the memory of his mother as is constituted by Harris's first chapter, to which, after adding his Tyrrell fabrication, he puts the words "Such were the father and mother of Oscar Wilde." Oscar was a good-natured, easy-going, peaceable man, but I feel sure that could he have foreseen this act of treachery and baseness on his "friend's" part he would have strangled him with his own strong hands one moonlight night in the pinewoods of Napoules. He might have forgiven him the vile slander about his brother, Willie, and possibly even the foul words about his wife, but this attack on his mother, this use of her name for purposes of which the worst gutter-snipe of yellow journalism would have been ashamed, he would have scotched the viper and killed its venom under his heel.

Shaw, however, saw nothing in it to comment upon but thought to add some piquancy to Harris's narrative by making

a little fun of Wilde's father, by a thrust at his own dead parent. He tells us that Sir William operated on his father for a squint in such a way "that my father squinted the other way all the rest of his life"

*Quel monde! Quel monde!*

I am the better prepared to say that the Tyrrell letter to Harris is a fabrication and, if the manuscript of it has been written, a forgery because in Chapter II, Harris quotes another letter from the dead Professor which is a provable forgery. It is entirely made up of phrases copied from my *Life of Wilde* and in my very words.

I had intended to reserve it for another chapter, but on reflection have decided to print it here and now, and so at once nail this particular lie about Professor Tyrrell to the counter.

Harris, it may be explained, does not name Tyrrell in the introductory lines with which on page 28 of his *Life* he prefaces the forged letter. He says it comes from a man "who has since made for himself a high name as a scholar at Trinity" but who does not wish his name given. Tyrrell was alive at the time this book was first published and would certainly have disclaimed the authorship of the letter. But later on, Harris in quoting further from Tyrrell states that he was the Trinity Don whose letter about Oscar Wilde at Portora he had quoted on page 28. Moreover his associate, H. D. Davray, who by his translation of Harris's book has played a questionable part in this literary imposture, substitutes for Harris's "the Trinity Don whom I have already quoted" (on page 40)—the name of Professor Tyrrell. This appears on page 44 of Davray's version. The two associates thus betray themselves.

Harris does more, he shows he knew nothing about Tyrrell, even his age, for he writes of him on page 40. "It must be borne in mind that the Don was one of his competitors at Trinity and a successful one." Tyrrell was as much one of

Wilde's competitors at Trinity, as were Courtney and Papillon competitors of mine at New College, Oxford, from '79 onward. Tyrrell was a don at T C D when Oscar came up from Portora. If Harris had studied my *Life of Wilde* which he pillaged so ruthlessly, with a little more attention, he would have seen on page 120 that when Wilde was being examined for one of the T C D scholarships, it was Mr Tyrrell who tested him in Greek and Latin vivâ voce

Also, had Harris read my book on the page referred to with a little closer attention he would have saved himself from attributing to Professor Tyrrell the ridiculous words he puts into his second faked letter from that gentleman. He makes Tyrrell say that Wilde "did not do so well in the long examination for a classical scholarship in his second year. He was placed fifth." He misses the fact that each of the ten candidates of whom I gave a list won one of the scholarships, but that Wilde never held his as he preferred to go to Oxford. The second name in the list of ten is that of Louis Claude Purser who afterwards became a Trinity Don and whom on my visit to Dublin I consulted about Oscar's schooldays. Purser had been at Portora with Oscar—Tyrrell had not. And a little farther down we shall come to a passage where Harris contradicts himself on the subject of Mr Tyrrell. Here follow in parallel columns on the left hand the statements in the forged Tyrrell letter quoted by Harris, and on the right the passages from my *Life* which Harris used to concoct the said spurious document.

Harris's *Confessions*  
(The Tyrrell Fake)

Oscar had a pungent wit, and nearly all the nicknames in the school were given by him (Page 28)

We noticed that he always

*My Life of Wilde*

He was a very clever boy at giving nicknames. He was the ironical sponsor to the whole school . . . (Page 105)

He had a great fondness for

## EXALTED DUPES OF LITERARY IMPOSTURES

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liked to have editions of the classics that were of stately size with large print. (Page 28)

He was more careful in his dress than any other boy (Page 28)

His care in dressing, too, and his delight in stately editions were all qualities which distinguished him to the end (Page 29)

He was a wide reader and read very fast indeed, how much he assimilated I never could make out (Page 29)

He was poor at music (Page 29)

We thought him a fair scholar but nothing extraordinary. However, he startled everyone the last year at school in the classical medal examination, by walking away easily from us all in the *vivâ voce* of the Greek play (*The Agamemnon*) (Page 29)

"At Trinity he did not strike us as a very exceptional person" (Page 43)

handsome books and choice editions. (Page 111)

Already in those days young Oscar Wilde showed that fondness for distinguished attire which ever marked him in life (Page 109)

He was a great reader, and assimilated what he read in a remarkable manner. He used to get through a book with a speed that astonished everybody, and what he read thus rapidly, he used to remember (Page 110)

In arithmetic he made no progress at all (Page 112)

Oscar Wilde was never looked upon as a formidable competitor by the boys (Page 110)

It was, perhaps, in the competition for the Gold Medal which is the great distinction at Portora that Oscar Wilde displayed his peculiar capacity for mastering the contents of a classical book. "In the *vivâ voce*," says one of his competitors, "which was on the *Agamemnon* of Æschylus, he simply walked away from us all" (Page 112)

Among certain men, prominent at Trinity College, Oscar Wilde was held "an average sort of man," and surprise was expressed when he came to the front. (Page 116)



There was not a breath against his character either at school or Trinity " (Page 42)	"There was not a breath of complaint about him in any way. His conduct was uniformly good. (Page 110)
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Should any reader take the trouble to refer to my *Life* about Oscar at Portora, I must explain that the Purser from whom I took my information was Mr Louis Claude Purser. He was just eighteen days older than Oscar. His father, Mr. Benjamin Purser, was master of history and geography at Portora when Oscar and Louis Claude were there together. He was the "Mr Purser" whom Oscar used to heckle so sedulously, as related by me.

It will be noted in the parallel columns given above that in only one point does Harris vary from my text. It is where he makes Tyrrell say that Wilde was "poor at music." Of course there never was any question of Wilde's studying music, which was an expensive extra, at Portora. But when Shaw came out with his remarks about Wilde's ignorance of the arts, with special reference to music, Harris thought he might serve the truth of this statement by changing the word "arithmetic" in the original Tyrrell fake to "music." Shaw, by the way, will find all about poor Oscar's inevitable pretence to artistic knowledge which he did not possess on pages 461 and 462 of my *Twenty Years in Paris*, published in 1905. The passage referred to begins "I think that the man who got closest to the truth in his reading of Wilde's character was the author of the review of *De Profundis* in *The Times* when he refers to his assumption of 'characteristics and qualities which were not his own,' etc." Shaw's disquisition on this subject might not be considered of much interest had it not afforded Harris an opportunity for appending a note which is supposed to back up Shaw. In this note he writes

He could hardly tell one tune from another, but he loved to talk of that "scarlet thing by Dvořák," hoping in this way to be accepted as

a real critic of music when he knew nothing about it and cared less. (App. Note on p. 20 of Shaw's *Memories of Oscar Wilde*)

In the *Mercure de France* attack on André Maurois, Auriant reproaches him with having plagiarized this Dvořák note from Harris and is backed up by Harris's impudent letter of April 15th, denouncing the piracies of Maurois in his *Études Anglaises*. This "plagiarism" is one of those I referred to in my letter to Maurois as having been perpetrated by Harris in the first instance on me. In his note he had simply paraphrased an anecdote of mine about Wilde and, of course, used it to attack Wilde. The anecdote is told in my *Life* on page 134. Here it is:

A friend (myself) of his relates that the rare occasion on which he saw Oscar Wilde angry with him was once when he had frequently repeated in his presence a phrase from one of Oscar's essays, which had struck him by its effectiveness so that he had pleasure in repeating it. This phrase was "a splendid scarlet thing by Dvořák." At the third repetition of these words Oscar flew into a veritable passion and rebuked his friend for wishing to ridicule him.

Quite possibly, of course, Wilde was less vexed at me for "pulling his leg" than for ignorantly pronouncing the great Bohemian composer's name as it is written, instead of "Dwōr-schak," which is its proper pronunciation. Wilde of course never repeated this phrase as Harris states. It reminded him of a veiled criticism, as he may have taken my innocent remark to be.

I presume that after Harris had finished the Tyrrell fake quotations, he interrupted his labours and from "felicity absented him awhile," and that when refreshed and with renewed vigour he sat down to further labours of fabrication, he entirely forgot that he had described Tyrrell as the contemporary of Wilde at Portora and Trinity and his successful competitor there. For in a certain passage he relates what, he says, Wilde told him of his life at Trinity, "that he got his love of the

Greek ideal and his intimate knowledge of the language from Mahaffy and Tyrrell " And he adds that Tyrrell was very kind to him So here he puts Tyrrell back in his right place as a teacher and not a condisciple of Wilde at Trinity, Dublin.

I am surprised to hear Shaw read Oscar's pronouncement on the students at T C D , as reported by Harris, without one word of objection. It is obviously as much fabrication as what precedes it Wilde never said any such things, never uttered any such slanders, for one thing because they are not true and for another because Wilde was the last person in the world who would have said such things about his fellow-students and countrymen

I do not think I am exaggerating when I say that if George Bernard Shaw had not been as entirely duped by Harris as was Goethe by Macpherson, he would by the time he reached page 40 of the book, that is to say before he had read more than one-fifteenth of its contents, have gauged the "friend's" perfidy, mistrusted the author's facts and suspected his methods. In one word, in his own parlance, he would have "rumbled" Frank Harris

## CHAPTER IV

### OSCAR ON THE PICTURES

THAT Harris's interest in Wilde and his pitiful life-story was—in spite of his professions of love and admiration for the unhappy man—solely and exclusively prompted by the consideration of the pecuniary advantage which he could derive from an exploitation of the Wilde scandal, and that his fabrication of confessions on the part of Wilde had no other motive, must surely have been patent to Shaw when he sat down to read *The Life and Confessions*

I have not read Harris's book about Bernard Shaw either in the British or more complete American edition, and so I do not know if the story of how Harris tried to interest Shaw in a film about "Oscar and his Career" has already been publicly recorded. I came upon it in a cutting from the *Detroit (Mich) Free Press* which was sent me by The International Presscutting Agency, who were sending me all notices of the "Unauthorized Biography O K 'd by G B S." I have seen no reference to this deplorable project elsewhere. Here it is in its squalor

. . . Nevertheless he apparently schemed deliberately to use Shaw and Shaw's popularity as the peg on which to hang a last success. He tried it once when he attempted to interest producers in a film based on the career of Oscar Wilde. The producers wanted Shaw to co-operate with Harris. They would not accept the venture unless Shaw consented. Harris cabled Shaw an offer of 3,000 dollars. Shaw leisurely wrote back, refusing. "I can," he said, "by lifting my finger get 50,000 dollars for an Oscar Wilde film by Bernard Shaw or with the name of Bernard Shaw in the advertisement of it

(*Detroit Free Press*, Nov. 29th, 1931)

One would fancy that such a proposal from Harris would definitely have opened Shaw's eyes as to Harris's interest in Wilde and his love for his memory "Oscar on The Pictures!" with no doubt Harris playing in person his own alleged rôle, registering turn and turn about. repugnance, admiration, enchantment, hesitation, decision, benevolence, reckless self-sacrifice, and such lachrymosity both on his part and Oscar's that the supply of glycerine in Hollywood would surely have run short, and so have boomed in price that criminals in Los Angeles might well have come to remember certain features of the German *Leichenverwertung* as practised during the War. For the bumping off of any medium guy would produce the raw material for at least seven pints of glycerine, which is what the producers use on the faces of the actors when these have to weep.

It would have been a ripsnorter of a film, a whale of a picture, a go-getter, a peacherino, a wow The Scarlet Marquess probably with coronet and ermined robes complete, Boy-Boy, and look at the supernumeraries And the scenes The Walk down Piccadilly in the *Æsthetic Period*, The Blackmailing Visits to Tite Street, The Call there of the Outraged Father, The First Trial, The Old Bailey, The Arrest, Holloway Gaol, The Visit of Harris, The Second Trial, The Release on Bail, The Hounding of Oscar, Harris to the Rescue, The *Flying Dutchman* in Erith Harbour, The Phantom Brougham, The Third Trial, The Old Bailey Again Wilde Rising from His Armchair in the Dock to Address the Judge after Sentence, Harris seated in the Lord Mayor's Seat under the Royal Arms registering Intense Distress, The Saraband of Outcasts in the Street Outside Wilde at Wandsworth—The Removal to Reading—The Scene on the Platform at Clapham—Reading Gaol Harris's Fresh Efforts—Harangues the Home Secretary—Reaches Reading Gaol as Plenipotentiary—Dismisses the Governor. Wilde in Distress in Paris—Harris, Harris, Harris . A Wow!

And the opportunities afforded by the story for Comic Relief! One instance only: Oscar on his Release Walking about in the Lovely Clothes tailored for him at Harris's expense on measurements taken two years previously, before he had lost "from thirty to forty pounds in weight" How enthusiastically hopeful Harris must have been about the certain financial success of this scheme is shown by the liberality of the fee he brought himself to offer Bernard Shaw by cable for his collaboration As this took place in the days of the silent screen, before the "talkies" had added to the horrors of living, all that he wanted of Shaw was a scenario for "Oscar On The Pictures" And he offers him exactly twelve times the amount which he had offered Oscar for the scenario of *Mr and Mrs Daventry*, provided also that he would write the first act And it must be remembered that Harris in an interview with Oscar in Reading Gaol represents himself as having offered to remunerate him at "even better rates than I am paying Bernard Shaw"

Poor Oscar accepted the £50, wrote more than the first act, and in so doing probably fixed in Harris's mind the scale of remuneration which could safely be offered, to leading dramatic authors for their collaboration He may have imagined that Shaw would be dazzled with the suggested fee of £600 and one would like to see the expression that his face registered when Shaw's "leisurely-written" answer informed him that his offer was less than the sixteenth part of what Shaw would accept, if he even considered the proposal, and mentioned a sum which was two hundred times greater than he had paid Wilde for something much more valuable Shaw's answer administered a much-needed censure to the unsnubbable Harris, but one is sorry that it reads as though Shaw's refusal was based on the financial question alone, as we all know the entire and very fine indifference of the Nobel-Prizewinner and the Houser of the Durham Miners to such considerations One would have liked to see him pointing out to Harris that his

project was so vile that it was an outrage to ask a man of honour to associate himself with it. And in any case it ought definitely to have "placed" Harris in his mind.

I am sincerely sorry to have to speak with such indignation about Harris as he reveals himself in his book on Wilde, a book which shall not go down to posterity as anything but a malicious fabrication, if any effort of mine can prevent it, because I knew Harris and used to admire him, as a personality.

As a personality, not as a writer. I simply could not read his short stories, though I tried hard as I heard them much praised. This was no doubt due to the misfortune by which, for some obscure psychological reason, I cannot appreciate or enjoy the works of many authors who delight millions of readers. For while I am an enthusiast about Charles Dickens I have never been able to read either Scott or Conrad. I have never read anything written by Shaw and have only once witnessed one of his plays, namely *Captain Brassbound's Conversion* at Birmingham when Ellen Terry was playing it. That was umpteen years ago and the effect it produced on me was that I never attended another Shaw play and have never wished to. *Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*, no doubt, because I have for years all over the world heard people talking (in various tongues) of the fascination and interest of these theatre-pieces, and as to *St Joan* I know it has enthusiastic admirers.

It is probable that in this matter of Shaw's work, the reason why I am so unfortunately debarred from the pleasure which it affords to others, is that my sense of humour is peculiar and restricted. The humour that appeals to me is not that which provokes the "roars of laughter" recorded in brackets in reports of lectures, speeches or plays. It is the humour the effect of which is occasionally mentioned in similar reports as "a laugh." I never see this solitary cachinnation recorded without trying to instruct myself as to what it was that appealed to the man who alone in the audience gave vent to it, or without wondering

wistfully whether he might not be a kindred soul, like myself; a pariah excluded from the Paradise of the Perfect Scream. I have been "a laugh" myself on several occasions. I remember that the only time on which I laughed during a performance of *Our Boys* was when the wealthy *jeune premier* answers his aunt, who has been suggesting various parlour games for their delectation, and having heard backgammon rejected with scorn, says "Well, we'll call it chess," with "Well you may *call* it chess." Mine was *the* laugh on that occasion, the only laugh, and it was the only sally that provoked my risibility during a performance which made the huge audience rock with inextinguishable mirth. Wilde's plays never amused me at all and the only time I attended a performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest* I went out of the theatre after the first act and yawned all the way home to bed. Yet I had gone there with the firm intention of following the play with the closest attention, as I was anxious to solve the physiological problem as to what had given the brain of its author the extraordinary and transforming stimulation of which this work gave evidence, and if indeed it had been the same that in France ten years previously had "transformed a beefy civil servant into one of the finest writers in French literature," as a critic wrote, in allusion to *Bel-Ami*, in reviewing my *Life of Guy de Maupassant*.

Poor Maupassant! Harris is frequently compared to him as a writer of short stories and we hear the latter spoken of as "the English Maupassant." How far this is justified I am not qualified to write, for though I have read and re-read Maupassant's tales with delight as a reader and generally high approval as a recensionist, I was never able to follow Harris, any more than Bouiget, or Bordeaux, or Hall Caine for more than one or at the most two pages of narrative. My fault, my mistake, my stupidity, no doubt, but there it is, the fact.

The only connection between Guy de Maupassant and Frank



Harris that anyone could trace in those days was that Frank had been made to figure in a transparent manner as a kind of colonial Bel-Ami in a novel called *The Adventures of John Johns* which is an obvious adaptation of Guy de Maupassant's novel *Bel-Ami*. John Johns is Frank Harris and Frank Harris is Georges Duroy. Most of the other characters, the whole plot, and most of the episodes have been borrowed from Maupassant and several of his phrases have been translated and shifted into Frederic Carrel's book. It is the most curious piece of transcription that I am aware of in the English book-selling trade and the odd fact is that it is published at 2s. 6d. by the gentleman who has specialized in Maupassant and who in the back of my copy of Carrel's book, which has been selling steadily since 1897 and is now in its seventeenth or eighteenth edition, announces his series of admirable translations of Maupassant's works by Mrs. Marjorie Werner Laurie, at the head of which series stands *Bel-Ami* at 7s. 6d. or three times the price of Carrel's adaptation of this remarkable study of the success that an unscrupulous scoundrel may attain by trading on his physical appeal to the sex-urge of women of all ages and social positions. John Johns in Carrel's book arrives at wealth and honours by exploiting feminine lust in exactly the same way as Georges Duroy in Maupassant's novel.

The initial success of the book in England came, of course, from the fact that everybody in London recognized Frank Harris in John Johns. There were striking resemblances between what was known of his adventurous career and that of Carrel's "hero". Here was a struggling journalist from the colonies who slowly *par les femmes* had lifted himself out of a squalid position as a reporter on lineage higher and higher in the social scale, cozening, deceiving and plundering one woman after another, until he reaches a high position, as the husband (unfaithful, of course) of a very rich woman with a magnificent residence in a fashionable quarter. John Johns of course goes

further than did Harris, because Carrel's hero is but the shadow of Maupassant's Georges Duroy and has to imitate his squalid prototype to the last line of the book. John's wife dies and we leave him like Georges having successfully kidnapped a very young girl, the daughter in Maupassant's story of the enormously wealthy Israelite newspaper proprietor and in Carrel's transcription of *Bel-Ami*, the child of a millionaire. Having succeeded in placing the child in a hopelessly compromising situation, John blackmails Mr Wilson into allowing him to marry his daughter, exactly as Georges did with the other father. And in both books we are left knowing that the child-wife will soon be betrayed by her husband in the arms of a former mistress of his to whom he usually returns periodically.

Carrel attempts a slim mode of camouflage to disguise the attack on Harris, to counteract the idea that he is caricaturing and vilifying him. He actually introduces Frank Harris by name as the Editor of the *Fortnightly Review*, whom John Johns studies to see how an editor ought to conduct himself. Certainly his description of his hero does not in all points tally with Harris's corporeal presentment, for though one recognizes the big moustache and especially "the keen black (?) eyes of extraordinary expression and penetration," Harris had blue eyes and a fine dominant nose devoid of the "snubness" of this feature in John Johns, nor was there noticeable about his face any "somewhat excessive breadth." On the other hand he certainly never reminded one of "the pirate of the Spanish main" whom Shaw beheld in him. He suggested to me some superior executive in a leading dry-goods emporium, who made himself up to remind people of Lord Randolph Churchill but never managed to invest himself with the attributes that mark the caste of Vere de Vere. He was entirely devoid of the *je ne sais quoi* which enswathes a gentleman. He was noisy, assertive. Crosland used to say that he

roared like a sucking-dove. Douglas writes that he was in the habit of spouting Greek on the slightest provocation and that he was fond of embellishing his disquisitional monologues with numerous quotations from poets of various nations and tongues. I do not remember any of these characteristics in him; I should certainly have avoided him if I had, and Carrel does not seem to have noticed them either, but he takes good care to let John Johns remind one of Harris on almost every page and even towards the very end of his book introduces a character of the unusual name of "Blanchamp," whom Harris mentions in his *Life and Confessions* in connection with a fairy-story he tells on page 363 of his second volume, about getting some clothes for Oscar against his release "I could not trust myself," he writes, "to talk to this man (the West-End tailor who is supposed to have refused to make the clothes for Wilde) and therefore sent my assistant editor and friend, Mr. Blanchamp, to have it out with him "

I have always thought that Harris was very unfairly treated by this John Johns book. The only excuse Carrel may have had for representing him as Bel-Ami is that, like Georges Duroy, he had married a rich widow and for some years lived in state with her in Park Lane. But there was nothing in Harris of the man who sponges on women. He was never a cake-eater but a male he-man. Certainly he seemed most avid for money and one heard stories that, if true, proved he had little scruple how he got it, but I never heard of his taking money from women who were in love with him. I have been with him at his house in Park Lane and noticed that he treated his wife, a quiet lady who seemed older than he was, with deferential courtesy and that, far from assuming any proprietary airs in the fine and luxuriously furnished house, he used to insist with almost unnecessary vigour that the house and everything in it were not his at all but "All my wife's! All my wife's "

It is a curious coincidence, by the way, that Bernard Shaw being, as we have recently been informed, descended from Macduff, Harris in his *Life and Loves* is obviously the spiritual descendant of that Malcolm who made such an appalling confession about his immorality to the said Macduff, who was urging him to "go for" the crown of Scotland

There's no bottom, none  
To my voluptuousness your wives, your daughters,  
Your matrons and your maids, could not fill up  
The cistern of my lust

Harris, the Shakespearian, must often have had this passage from Act IV of *Macbeth* in his mind when he was penning his pornographic autobiography, and his remembrance of it must continually have stimulated his prurient imagination, for there is no doubt that most of the stories of his "loves" are as much pure invention as the "confessions" attributed to Oscar Wilde. He has recently been compared in this respect to Casanova "without Casanova's talent." He certainly had as great a gift of dirty imagination as the Venetian writer of erotic memoirs, which can be as easily proved to be largely sheer "fake," as the "confessions" which Harris makes about himself and those which he puts into the mouth of Oscar Wilde.

Certainly in his conversation at the time of which I am speaking he never betrayed that he was carrying about inside his lumbar region the unpleasant and unfillable receptacle to which Malcolm gives a name. He was quite a clean-spoken man and a clean-minded one too, one would have said, although, of course, any worldling contemplating his exuberant energy, his fullbloodedness and the unrestricted way in which he satisfied, even gluttoned, his body in response to its other claims, would have surmised him to be a man of unbridled procreancy. But he never spoke about it. And I only once saw him do something which showed that under a civilized and

urbane exterior, the ruttish wild boar was fleshing its tusks. We had been visiting Teixeira de Mattos together in his chambers in Plowden Buildings in the Temple and as we were returning down the staircase, Harris noticed written on the whitewashed wall that flanked the steps some writings—"the short and simple annals of the poor," as I always call them—referring to matters which are usually dealt with in public lavatories and in a vocabulary with which readers of certain passages in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* have of late been made familiar. "Oh!" cried Harris, whipping out a pocket pencil, "this can be added to!" and suited the action to the word. But that was the one and only time that Harris ever did a coarse thing in my presence

I used to admire the extreme audacity of the man. I used to think that in any revolution in England, he might come to play the part of the man who bellowed for "*de l'audace, encore de l'audace et toujours de l'audace*," and indeed as far as venality is in question he did resemble Danton to the last, but in other respects Chabot rather and Fabre d'Églantine, whose forgeries were more pardonable than his have been, though they brought these two to the guillotine, while Harris's fabrications led him to the luxurious flat at 9 rue de la Buffa in Nice, a *placens uxor* and the high approval of distinguished contemporaries. Fabre and Chabot, after all, only falsified the Decree about the *Compagnie des Indes* for the purpose of blackmailing that company, while Harris, behind the mask of devoted friendship, has deliberately falsified Wilde's life-story and sacrificed his memory for the purpose of blackmailing posterity.

With regard to his extreme audacity, I remember being with him one night in an upstairs private room in the Criterion. We were talking and drinking. And here let me say that to write of Harris as an intemperate drinker, or even as a drunkard, as some obituary-writers have done, is unjust and untrue. He was no more a drunkard than was Wilde. A *franc buveur*,

a Rabelaisian lover of the bottle, just like Wilde, he undoubtedly was; but I never saw him the worse for drink. He used to remind me of something Alphonse Daudet once said to me: "You see no drunkenness in the South of France *Nous y naissons saouls*. (We come into the world there intoxicated) Intoxicated with the sun, with the music of the *cigales*, with the air, with song and dance " Harris, as someone else was described in a philippic, was "intoxicated with the exuberance of his own verbosity "

We sat on and on discoursing It was long since we had listened to the chimes at midnight, for we were both noctambulous and late-walkers, when there entered the room an apologetic and almost cringing waiter to tell us that it was long past two o'clock a m—I remember, he pronounced it hay hem—and that we must really be going, as the police . . . "Oh! Nonsense," cried Harris "It is I, Frank Harris, who am here and this is a business friend, with whom I am discussing a matter of the highest importance You can tell them downstairs to telephone, if they like, to the Commissioner of Police, at his private address and they'll see it is all right And you can bring us each a large whisky and soda when you come back "

But where I most admired this trait in his character was when after Wilde's release on bail he came to call on him at the house in Oakley Street and invited him to come out to luncheon, and when questioned by Willie as to where he meant to take his brother, said "To the Café Royal, of course " I describe this incident in my *Unhappy Friendship* book and there record how fine I thought his defiance of the mob and this method of showing London that he totally disbelieved the charges against his friend and that he was proud to be seen in his company It seemed to me to be dictated by the same chivalrous spirit which later on prompted the Scandinavian painter Thaulow (as recorded by Lemonnier) in a café in

## GEORGE, FRANK AND OSCAR

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Dieppe, after Wilde's release, to stand up and publicly in a loud voice invite Oscar to come to lunch with him in his villa, *en famille*, when some English customers having objected to Wilde's presence in the place he was about to be turned out of the establishment with ignominy

## CHAPTER V

### THE MAN AND THE BOOK

I AM sorry that Harris in his account of his visit to Oakley Street (pp 281, 282) adduces my testimony which many years previously I had given of it, because this tends to make it guarantee the various fabrications in connection with this visit which follow on his invitation to Wilde and the latter's very seemly refusal of it. Wilde did *not* go out with Harris that day and consequently the luncheon in the private room at the restaurant in Great Portland Street never took place, nor the conversation between Harris and Wilde that Harris alleged was held then and there.

This conversation is one of the many infamous fabrications in the book. It is the one in which Harris represents Wilde as confessing to him, Harris, the "fantastic and incredible" thing, that he was not innocent of the charges which had been brought against him at the Old Bailey. It gives Harris a splendid opportunity of proving the extent of his friendship by declaring that this confession "made no difference at all" to him. It also leads the way to the tale of his efforts to induce Wilde to flee the country and to his absurd story—implicitly believed in by Shaw and others—of the M.P.'s yacht at Erith and the two-pair brougham of his imagination. This was a mere substitution of himself for the present writer and I must say that though I never publicly objected to his copious plagiarisms from my book, I did think this other kind of plagiarism, this *ôte-toi de là que je m'y mette* by which he robbed me of any little admiration from the



lawless for an act of reckless self-sacrifice, did rouse some indignation in me. I deal with the whole fabrication lower down.

The ruthless portrayal of Harris as what the French call a *dos vert* in the character of John Johns, produced no effect on me at all and I paid no attention to the book beyond wondering whether I ought not in memory of poor Guy de Maupassant to notify his mother of the piracy committed by this publication, as she was the guardian of little Simone, Guy's niece and sole heiress, executrix of his will and guardian of his estate.

I had previously paid similar inattention to the many disparaging stories that were current about the rich editor who lived in Park Lane. When I was told that Sir Bartle Frere at a dinner-party one night at his house had rung for the butler, just after the ladies had left the table and had ordered Frank Harris's carriage to be called, explaining to the expostulating Harris that he had overheard certain remarks made by the editor of the *Fortnightly* to the lady sitting next to him at table and that he, Sir Bartle Frere, would never tolerate such conduct in his house, I simply shrugged my shoulders as vigorously as I did when the other day I read in Douglas's *Autobiography* that Frank Harris, having gone to call on Wilfred Blunt for the purpose of an interview, was—the butler having been rung for—given his congé in about five minutes. It is a common experience of interviewers to be shown to the door when the person called on does not care to be interrogated. I myself when I once tried to interview Bismarck in the Friederichs-Strasse in Berlin was accorded by the interviewer considerably less than five minutes, no longer time, in fact, than it took him to pronounce the one word "WEG!" (Get Out!) As regards the Blunt interview, so skilful a newspaper man, trained in Chicago, would find more than ample material in Mr. Blunt's Humph's and Ha's, to fashion forth columns

of newspaper matter, imagination aiding, or even a Contemporary Portrait, considerably more authentic than some to which he put his name.

The Bartle Frere incident did not disparage Harris in my eyes at all because, having lived abroad most of my life, I know how difficult it is for people coming from abroad into England to avoid saying things with the most innocent intentions, which may give mortal offence because of the vast difference in the mentality of the British nation and its view of what is seemly and what is not. Harris probably had said in the most innocent way in the world something which a Parisienne would have considered a banal commonplace, but which in England—all this was in the eighties of last century, be it remembered—would be regarded as shocking in the extreme. Just as if a Britisher dining at a bourgeois dinner-table even to-day in Paris were to tell his hostess in connection with the elegant furnishing and decoration of her house that he would very much like to see her in her boudoir. He might possibly get his ears boxed, he would certainly be called sharply to order by the husband and the amenity of the dinner-party would as certainly be spoiled for the rest of the evening.

Nobody was more surprised than I was when I read Harris's *Life and Confessions*, because though I had always suspected that his interest in Oscar arose mainly from what he hoped to make out of him, especially when all was ruin in him except his magnificent brain and incomparable wit and conversation, I had never imagined he could be base enough, for no other purpose than one of money-getting, to vilify Oscar's memory by presenting him as the squalid hero of a pornographic book. When Harris afterwards began issuing his own *Life and Loves* and thus made himself also the squalid hero of a low Casanoviad, I had still sufficient liking left for the man to endeavour to condone the worst features of the former work by deciding that the man's mind had been affected in the way that senile

decay does affect even the most brilliant intellects, jostling back into an obscene animalism of thought or word or act men who through long lives have earned by their conduct and civic virtue the high respect of their contemporaries. So much so, that when the British Government sent over copies of the *Life and Loves* to the French authorities in the hope that its author might be prosecuted in France if it could be established that Harris had committed an offence against the French law by trafficking in obscene books in that country, I tried indirectly to save him from a prosecution in the Court of Assizes. I do not for one moment suggest that the humble excuses I then made for him and my declarations about his great talents and literary ability had the slightest effect on the gentlemen who were commissioned to read and report on the *Life and Loves* (of which at that time only two volumes had been issued). I only mention this to show that I never harboured ill-feeling against Harris.

In any case the volumes evoked in high legal circles little but hilarity and Harris was allowed to continue to issue to the last his pornographic parcels to the four points of the compass, unchallenged by the French law. The real reason of this impunity was explained to me after his death by a magistrate who had had an opportunity of seeing the report which was made on the volumes. He was so good as to set out these reasons in a letter to me which runs as follows:

If the affair about which you write to me was not further dealt with by French Justice, it was because it was considered that public order was not affected by the publication of a book printed in English, issued in a limited number of copies and, in the main, sent abroad in sealed packets. Besides this the law of July 29th, 1881, appoints the *Court of Assize* to repress outrages against public morality by way of obscene books, as distinct from newspapers, magazines, etc., and it seemed useless to give to a book which was totally unknown to the French public the resounding publicity of an assize court prosecution while risking the chance of an acquittal by the jury.

Knowing the Nice jury as I do, I think the magistrate might have written "certainty" instead of "chance"

My acquaintance with the scandalous *Life and Confessions* was first made through Davray's able though not always faithful translation. When I definitely decided to deal with the book in print and it became necessary for me to procure the volumes in the original English, I encountered some difficulty. Only one bookseller in Nice stocked the volumes and he was only unearthed after a long hunt by friends of mine. He was demanding 200 francs for the book, or three dollars more than the proper price. I then wrote to Harris, using a friend's name to inform him of the fact. His answer showed that his attention was monopolized by *The Life and Loves*, for he wrote.

9 RUE DE LA BUFFA,

NICE

. . . *MY LIFE* is in three volumes, the third volume being in two parts. I sell the four at Frs 1200, so if you got one for 200 Francs, you got it very cheap.

I had to put up the price because so many books were confiscated in America.

Yours Sincerely,

FRANK HARRIS.

It was not his own *Life* but his *Life of Wilde* that I had written to him about.

I admit that this letter distressed me. It was indeed saddening to have this proof of the base uses to which the Frank Harris, as I remembered him that afternoon in Oakley Street, and particularly the Frank Harris who had been so kind to John Davidson and had given my poor friend by his high appreciation of *The Ballad of a Nun* and his estimation of its high pecuniary worth, one of the very few joys his literary career had brought him, had descended. I felt sorry for him.

I "visualized" a "Dying Gladiator" and my resentment against him for his atrocious conduct towards the dead Oscar flickered lower and lower. His plagiarisms from me and one or two insidious attempts to discredit and misrepresent me which he had made in his *Life and Confessions* I had treated, the former with a shrug of the shoulders and the latter with a pitying smile, long before. All the more so that none of Wilde's friends or relations in England seemed to think the *Life* worth troubling about in any way. One of those who stand closest to the dead poet and philosopher wrote me: "Frank Harris is rather an extinct volcano. His *Life and Confessions* of himself have banished him for ever, I am afraid, from the realms of serious literature. Personally, I always think that it is better to ignore all these things." Unfortunately posterity will not ignore them and writers yet unborn will not cease telling men and women yet unborn, of the horrors to which Wilde had confessed. Several of the biographies already issued are maculated with Harris's unclean inventions. That, apart from Shaw's reiterated approbation, is the reason of this book.

But at the time I felt sorry for the "frail, old man" who had fallen from Academe down into the gutter of Holywell Street, and remembering also the words that Oscar had written in his dedication of *An Ideal Husband* to Frank Harris about his "chivalry and nobility as a friend," I resolved that as long as he lived I would do nothing to interfere with his peace of mind or with his acquisition by any means in his enfeebled powers of the wealth necessary for the purchase of "the mud-honey" for which he craved.

It was accordingly with no great enthusiasm that late in 1929 I perused a typed circular letter from Chicago, announcing that the sender was engaged on a biography of "that strange creature," Frank Harris, and would be glad of any information I could supply, mentioning Galsworthy, Leonard Huxley, Winston Churchill, Ernest Newman, Lord Dunsany, Francis

Hackett, as having already "obliged" In a covering letter, I was told that the writer was "especially eager to have your reactions to Harris's *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions*, as my book calls for a lengthy examination of that celebrated work"; and he was good enough to add that he had already the impressions of Lord Alfred Douglas, but that "what you will say will be of the very greatest interest and value"

I do not exactly remember what I wrote in reply, beyond, I think, that my reaction towards Harris for having written such a book closely resembled that obtained from a healthy patient who is under the impression that he is heading for *tuberculosis*, when the specialist hits him just above the knee-cap and the booted foot flies vigorously upwards I was not in a mood particularly to wish to injure Harris and I gathered that the proposed biography was not intended to be a friendly one I spoke most strongly, however, on the subject of the *Confessions*, which I described as a fake almost from the first page to the last On February 6th, 1930, Mr Gertz wrote to me saying he was grateful to me for my helpful and candid letter, and thanked me for my "generosity," but requested me to give him all my reasons for describing the *Life and Confessions* in such strong language He added that so far everybody had assured him that the book was truthful, and wished me to point out a few of Harris's misstatements. I did not answer this further letter, it seemed to me that Mr Gertz, being a Chicago lawyer and trained in sifting evidence, would have little difficulty in disproving many of Harris's fabrications out of his own mouth from the contradictions in the book itself.

I had very little knowledge of Harris as an editor but I was with him and other friends when he took possession of the *Saturday Review* office after he had bought this publication A great deal has been made by Davray and others in Paris of the fact that Harris was once the proprietor and editor of this periodical, and I do believe that in his hands it became a re-

munerative venture. But at the time he bought it, it was in a decidedly moribund condition and had been hawked round for sale at almost any price in all the literary marts in England. It had even been proposed to my friend, the late Sir Hall Caine, and I happened to be staying at Greeba Castle in the Isle of Man when the offer was made to him. A copy of the last issue had accompanied the letter of proposal and I remember the air of depreciation with which he was turning the pages over. This disparagement was not caused, however, by the literary quality of the printed matter, but by something in the appearance of the typesetting which proclaimed the fact that only a very small edition had been expected. "Why, look here!" he cried, pointing to a printed page and making some technical remark, "I don't believe they are printing 2,000 a week." And the offer was promptly turned down.

It rather amused me to invade, in the wake of the triumphant and elate Frank Harris, the editorial sanctum whence so many bolts had been launched against young writers whose maiden efforts had here received short shrift—often enough with the excellent effect of warning them off the path of letters *ce chemin où prospèrent la ronce et l'ortie* as Verlaine described it. Harris was in high spirits and for a moment this august and austere apartment was the scene of boyish diversions, in which a yawning waste-paper basket figured now as coiffure, now as a football. I think a bottle and glasses were produced and the health of the new editor boisterously toasted.

Harris was never successful as an editor, and failed time after time. I know there was permanent melancholy in the heart of Oswald Crawford, of Chapman and Hall's, while Harris was in authority over the *Fortnightly*, and he objected very strongly to the "long prices" which Harris suggested as remuneration for special work which he particularly admired, such as Wilde's essays and John Davidson's *Ballad of a Nun*. He was in this respect a pioneer with Alfred Harmsworth in

the great improvement in the status, social and pecuniary, of the working journalist. Harris, at least, got some recognition of his good intentions and was liked as an editor, and even the harsh Crosland sang the praises of his acumen in the matter of poetry and of his liberality towards his contributors "Harris," he wrote, "is one of the few editors who can appreciate good poetry and absolutely the only one who knows how to pay for it" Harris was very kind to Crosland and recognized his genius and proclaimed it He did not escape what was inevitable when one had any dealings with Crosland

I had only one transaction with Harris as between contributor and editor and that was when I wrote an article at his request for the *Saturday Review*, on my friend Émile Zola and his espousal of the cause of Captain Dreyfus The main interest of the article was geographical as I was able to console Dreyfus's friends and admirers by contradicting the nonsense that was being printed about the horrors of Devil's Island (so called because a convict, known as le Diable, had once been kept there) and quoted from a pamphlet written by a Nantes *proscrit* named Chalosse, who was confined there after the December coup d'état, and who described it as reminding him of *un Paradis terrestre* Harris was quite satisfied, though he thought its tendency anti-Dreyfusard, and I was "suitably remunerated" But I never did anything else for the *Saturday* I used to think Harris did not care for my prose till that notion was dispelled by seeing how liberally he had helped himself to my very words when plagiarizing my books for his Wilde concoction

Harris was too truly an artist in letters to have much appreciation of journalism, or indeed any understanding of it Such journalistic experience as he had, had been gained on what is called in America the Yellow Press, where he undoubtedly had learned the trick of the fabrication of sensational copy, evolved in the main from the imagination, of which he makes



so inordinate and so evil a use in his book on Wilde and with minor criminality in his own biography. I noted the other day in a biographical obituary of him published in the States, that he had lost his first and best job as a salaried reporter on a Chicago paper because he had brought in the lurid description—a “regular whale of a story”—of a dreadful fire in the city editor’s domain which had never taken place. He was a very bad editor to the *Evening News* in London, and brought this paper, which since in the Harmsworth hands showed its marvellous possibilities, to the very verge of extinction. He was deft in making use of an editorial position (combined with that of owner) to make money in ways outside the recognized standards of journalistic enterprise. His methods eventually led him to bankruptcy and total discredit, and thence to pornography.

His audacity remained with him to the end. I remember a typical example of it. It was in 1908. The occasion was the “banquet” given by subscription to Robert Ross to celebrate the final publication of the first collected edition of Oscar Wilde’s complete works, which he had edited with such loving care. I had come up from the country to attend it and was staying at the Ritz. After the dinner, where I had the good fortune to sit next to Mrs. Frankau, with whom I had some entertaining conversation, and who was kind enough to say “This dinner ought, of course, to have been given to you,” I left the room to escape the oratory and was sitting in the penumbra of discreet lighting in the Ritz lounge, or winter garden.

I had noticed as I passed, that there was a supper-party being entertained at a long table near the entrance, and while I was resting in my chair, I could hear that the numerous guests were being harangued in what sounded like a deep basso voice greatly subdued, which went on and on and on. I concluded that this must be the host and I gathered he must be a man of fecundity and standing, for while he spoke so

abundantly, he by no means limited his guests' enjoyment to mere listening, for there was an array of ever-renewed Hock bottles on the table, with caviare and similar dainties "on the side," while the occasional pop of a champagne cork broke in on the monotonous undercurrent of oral sound.

The whole place at that late hour was so dimly lighted that even if I had scrutinized the party I could hardly have recognized anyone. I was, however, too much taken up with the thoughts that that night's occurrence had evoked and paid little attention to the shadow feast on my right. At last as I was rising to go to the lift, and once more cast my glance in the direction of the door, I noticed that, with the noiselessness that the decorum of that exalted sphere automatically imposed, the guests had all departed and that there was left standing by the supper-table, still a-bristle with slim bottleage, the Rhetor of the Minor Key, erect and affluent in fur-coat and shining top-hat. To him at that moment the attendant came up and some muted words were exchanged. And then "I am Mr Frank Harris, I tell you, the best-known man in London, and I'll sign the bill and pay it when convenient, as I've done here dozens of times before. You can ask Monsieur ——" And I recognized Harris, Harris the irrepressible, whom I had lost sight of for years. It was only while I was ascending (by gravitation, like Shaw) in the lift that I remembered that the fur-coated magnate who had feasted his friends with eloquence, sturgeon's roes and Liebfrauenmilch that night had been a pauper for several months past.

Yes: *De l'audace, encore de l'audace et toujours de l'audace!*

## CHAPTER VI

### SIR FRANK BENSON TO THE RESCUE

HAVING in his first chapter besmirched Oscar's parents, it is in Chapter II—which covers his schooldays at Portora—that Harris begins to show that already at the age of 16 Wilde had formed a friendship of a perverse nature. Harris proceeds here by innuendo rather than direct statement and endeavours to convict his friend out of his own mouth by words which Harris himself has invented.

I have not the least hesitation in saying that the whole of the story of Oscar's friendship with a schoolmate of his who was two years his junior, attributed to Oscar, which fills pages 31 to 36 of the chapter, is simply invention. It is the first "confession" that Harris puts into his victim's mouth and it is as false as all those that follow it. But here as well as in the worse fabrication at the end of the chapter on Oxford which slanders Walter Pater it has pleased Harris to depict Wilde at the outset of his perversity as playing a passive rôle. It is he who is assailed and embraced. I presume that when only page 31 of his book had been reached Harris had not yet made up his mind utterly to sacrifice his friend's memory. Though for the sake of the sale of the book it must perforce be a story of perversity, he may have thought it would suffice to show Oscar as the victim of the aberrations of others. Later on he jettisons all such scruples and makes the "confessions" real avowals of guilt.

In Oscar's alleged narrative about the Portora friendship there are one or two slips on the part of Harris which suffice

to show its inauthenticity. In his ignorance of the course of things in the scholastic world, or with his usual contempt for his readers' credulity, he makes Oscar tell him that he was sent for one day by the Headmaster of Portora who informed him that he had won an "Exhibition" (which is untrue) and that he was to go to Trinity College, Dublin; that he rushed off to inform his "chum" of the great news and announced that he was leaving Portora next morning to enter T C D. Harris seems to be under the impression that a man can enter the University any old time that suits him and without the preliminary formality of a matriculation examination. Yet Harris had my biography before him and might have learned there that it was not till after the summer vacation and after he had left Portora some months that Wilde matriculated—and very creditably—at T C D. He could also have learned that it was not till much later that he won a scholarship there which he never entered upon. Of course this sudden departure of Oscar's from Portora in the middle of the school-term is an absurd narrative to put into his mouth and so is his alleged account of how the "chum" got permission from Dr Steele to accompany him to the station and did so accompany him, an idiotic hors d'œuvre to the nauseous dish which Harris makes Oscar describe as having been served up at the station.

Apart from this I think that had any such friendship existed between Oscar and another lad, there would have been some mention of it in Sir Edward Sullivan's letter to Harris about Wilde's schooldays at Portora where Sir Edward was his play-mate. As it had been generally made known that Oscar Wilde had been rather stand-offish as a schoolboy and consequently not popular with his schoolfellows, Sir Edward would most certainly have referred to this warm friendship to prove the exception. Another point is that after this story has been told about this mysterious youth he is never heard of again in Harris's narrative. Seeing that Harris represents himself as

cross-examining Wilde continually to get at his perverted "sex credo" it is surely very extraordinary, to say the least, that he never again refers to this boy of 14, who, he would have us believe, initiated Wilde into the horrible mentality that according to Harris was to hag-ride him for the rest of his life

It is all the more extraordinary because he has represented Wilde as telling him, Harris, in describing how he broke the news of his lightning departure to his cold, bitter and resentful "chum" of 14, that he had urged on the lad to come and see him at his father's house in Merrion Square, which, the boy must know, "was in the best part of Dublin" The boy of 14 had told him that he would frequently be up in town and was looking at him with "yearning and regretful eyes," and so Oscar invited him to the private room that Dr Wilde was going to put at his disposal in the fashionable family mansion But we never hear of the lad's coming there Perhaps he was too modest to show himself in the "best part of Dublin"; perhaps Harris would have us suppose that Oscar was so disgusted with the boy's conduct at the station, the boy's hot hands, his passionate kiss, and the very unpleasant, cold, sticky tears that Oscar felt trickling down his cheeks after the train started, that he told the footmen at Merrion Square he was "not at home" if the perverse young fellow should ever happen to call, when doing Dublin Town

But more than this—if Wilde had had any such remarkable friendship as a lad, how is it that he told me that he had never had a real friend as a boy or at Trinity? He said, "The only affection I had as a child was for my sister Isola and, of course, in a lesser degree for Willy" It was on that occasion that he told me the story of the toy bear he had given Willy, of which, whenever he and his brother fell out, he used to demand the instant return It was on the same occasion that he spoke to me of Isola as "a ray of sunshine dancing about the house," which Harris has borrowed from me We used to talk a great

deal about his schooldays as we were walking about the midnight streets of Paris in those first wonderful days of our "unhappy friendship," and he never told me about this dear friend of his in whose existence anyhow I should never have believed. Never have believed, because you see I knew Wilde very well and it would have been impossible for him to tell such a story. Harris might just as well have asked me to believe that, calling on Renan at the École de France, he had overheard the great exegetist reproaching his *femme de ménage* for some domestic peccadillo in terms borrowed from the vocabularies of Zola and other naturalists.

No, no! I can only consider this long passage as a preliminary canter of the good horse Fakir, Harris up. It is less offensive than most of the fakes that follow because the friend whom Oscar is supposed to talk about remains an ethereal being without form or substance. I fancy that Harris must have realized this, for at the end of the succeeding chapter (Chapter III) he lets himself go completely and fabricates a confession from Oscar Wilde which befouls the memory of a gentleman of letters and a scholar whom Wilde admired immensely as one of the great masters of English prose, Walter Horatio Pater.

But before we come to this fabrication something must be said about the biographical sketch Harris gives of Wilde's career at Oxford—a not unimportant period in his life-history for a biographer to consider. However, Harris disposes of this part of Oscar's life in exactly two pages, bringing him in this circumscribed space from his matriculation on July 11th, 1874, to his triumphal appearance in the Sheldonian Theatre on June 26th, 1878, to recite the Newdigate prize poem *Ravenna*. Harris seems to have had no information whatever about Wilde at Oxford except what he was able to glean from my books, though here and there he improves on my text. For example, I had written that "his verses were listened to

with rapt attention," which I quoted from a contemporary. Harris, for the sake of local colour, quoting the same eulogy, attributes it to the *Oxford and Cambridge Undergraduates' Journal* of which I do not think many 'Varsity men have heard. Much of the previous part of this chapter had been borrowed or adapted from me.

And now to come to the Pater fabrication

In the course of my researches about Oscar at Oxford for my biography, I had come across an insignificant item in a newspaper about a fancy-dress ball that was given by a Mrs. Morrell at Headington Hill, where he appeared in the costume of Prince Rupert. I made a note of this incident because I thought it was strange to read of Oscar Wilde masquerading, he who afterwards "masqueraded in defiance of society and was later on made by society to masquerade in defiance of himself." My reference to this appears at the head of Chapter VIII on page 159 of my biography, just where it would catch the eye of somebody grubbing for useful facts. With this he could lend artistic verisimilitude to otherwise "bald and unconvincing statements" attributed to Wilde. He makes prompt use of this to introduce the long conversation from pages 44 to 49 which ends with the filthy innuendo against Walter Pater.

However, with his usual method, in order not to appear to copy me word for word, he gives Mrs. Morrell's husband the Christian name of "George" and he adds a "Hall" to my Headington Hill. But he overlooks the fact, most prominently stated—in fact the chapter begins with the date—that this very minor function took place on May 1st, 1878, that is to say, more than eight weeks before the triumph at the Sheldonian. Harris, however, places it as having occurred just after the recitation of the prize poem and makes Wilde begin his imaginary monologue by referring to the great success he had enjoyed at this ball as a Newdigate prizewinner. He

makes poor Oscar say. "I hardly danced at all!" but that he had talked most brilliantly, turning all his foes into friends, and that he had had the divinest evening. He then bursts out into two pages of eulogy of Oxford—a eulogy which smells of Harris ten yards off. He is supposed to have described "all the appurtenances of life at Oxford as perfect. the food, the wine, the cigarettes!"—though I don't think cigarettes were much smoked at the 'Varsity in '78, and I can hardly imagine a gourmet like Oscar describing the wine and the battels as "perfect." But where Harris, or rather Fakir, comes a most tremendous cropper is where he goes on to make Oscar say, "It was at Oxford I first dressed in knee breeches and silk stockings. I almost reformed fashion and made modern dress æsthetically beautiful."

If Harris had studied my biography with a little more care, he would have seen that it was not till some years after he left Oxford that Oscar "adopted those eccentricities of costume which later attracted universal attention to his person." Or he might have gone direct to the source whence I drew this information. Mr. Walter Hamilton's *The Æsthetic Movement in England*. At Oxford, Oscar—as shown in the photographs of him as an undergraduate (one of which I publish in my *The Real Oscar*) dressed like everybody else—the men would see to that—and appeared "comfortably and soberly attired in a tweed suit with a flannel shirt and a tie unassumingly gathered into a knot under his turndown collar." In the winter he used to wear a grey ulster. His hair was brushed back from his forehead and was not too long.

With reference to Pater, Harris makes him say "Pater meant everything to me. He taught me the highest form of art: the austerity of beauty." Pater as a teacher meant so little to Oscar Wilde, that when Pater, who was a Fellow and Tutor of Brasenose College, was lecturing on Plato in 1875 and '76, "Wilde did not attend any of his lectures." Wilde



had a great admiration for Pater as a writer and Pater reciprocated this feeling towards Wilde's work in a certain measure, but there were never such relations between the two men as to authorize anyone to speak of them as friends. Certain letters from Wilde to Pater and from Pater to Wilde are in existence and, purely on literary topics, are cordial and appreciative and nothing more. Stuart Mason gives two of Pater's letters to Wilde, one dated 1888 and the other 1890, and neither contains the faintest suggestion that ever at any time had Pater had for Wilde the feeling of overwhelming physical attraction which might lead the Fellow of a College and a Public Lecturer to make such an exhibition of himself in broad daylight in a public place as Harris makes Oscar falsely describe in the course of this fabricated "confession." Pater addresses Oscar in these letters as "My dear Wilde" and signs himself "Yours very sincerely."

It is true I have another letter from Pater to Wilde which could be twisted by Sergeant Harris into something quite as insidious, incriminating and condemnatory as Pickwick's "chops and tomato sauce" to Mrs. Bardell. It is a letter in which "Yours very sincerely, Pater" asks Wilde to come round to his rooms in Earl Street one afternoon to have a cup of tea as he had not seen him for so very long.

When I went up in '80, by which time Oscar was quite forgotten in Oxford, I did certainly hear foul aspersions against prominent professors and scholars, but never once was a breath breathed against the reputation of Walter Pater, in fact I never heard the Brasenose don spoken of at all, and was unaware—being a healthy young Philistine chiefly interested in Lord Valentia's hounds—of the very existence of this fine scholar.

There is no doubt at all, I am afraid, that the evil reputation which later sullied his name came solely from the fact that after Wilde's condemnation it was maliciously remembered

against him that Wilde had always been so enthusiastic about him and that he, Pater, had seemed to wish to advance Wilde and propagate his views on certain objectionable matters by his *Bookman* review of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

But it may be well here to recall E. J. Bock's admirable study, *W. Pater's Einfluss auf O. Wilde* (Pater's Influence on O. Wilde), which has been summed up in Professor Choisy's biography of Oscar Wilde in a few words as follows:

Walter Pater avait pour Wilde le prestige d'un grand prosateur et d'un prêtre de la beauté. Ses essais sur la Renaissance lui révélèrent la splendeur de la prose anglaise et lui parurent "l'écriture sainte de la beauté." Dans leur rapports Pater maintenait envers son disciple une attitude réservée, il se méfiait de ce dandy et parlait de lui avec sévérité.

Professor Choisy therefore, after reading Herr Bock's book which was based on probatory documents and careful and extended inquiry and investigation, informs us that "*In his relations with Wilde Pater took up an attitude of reserve towards his disciple, he was distrustful of this dandy and used to speak of him with severity*"

Choisy had Harris's book on his writing-table when he was writing his *Life of Wilde* and was not for a moment so credulous as to believe the story about Pater. I can see him shrugging his shoulders in his pleasant study in the University buildings in Geneva, but I am rather surprised he should have gone on using Harris's fabrications—and his references to *The Life and Confessions* are continuous—after he had had this opportunity of gauging Harris's truthfulness.

Harris, however, is writing about the Pater of twenty years earlier than when the scurrilities about the latter began to crystallize. As he had set out to depict Wilde—for the portrait of him "by which his memory is to stand or fall"—as a pervert proud and proclamatory of his abnormality, he deemed it useful and lucrative for his book to show Wilde seeking out and fostering doubtful and dangerous contacts both

at school and at the 'Varsity For the Portora demonstration he invents a mysterious phantom boy of 14 and for the Oxford postulate, jettisoning all human respect and decency, he uses the name of a man of universal renown for his ignoble purpose It was as safe to slander Pater, as it had been to traduce a non-existent schoolboy, because Pater was dead and because some slight probability and therefore credence might be vouchsafed to his fabrication because of the slanders about the author of *Marius, the Epicurean* which were bandied about twenty years later

I do not suppose that he, Harris, paused for a single moment to think what would have been Wilde's feelings could he have read the story he puts here into his mouth He may have conjectured that if Wilde had let pass the first chapter, in which he slanders and outrages the memory of Speranza, without beating the life out of him, Harris, he would be resigned to anything—even to this befoulment of such a sacred association as he once himself so eloquently described "After all," Harris would say to himself, "Wilde is dead! What risk do I run?"

It is not difficult to understand Harris I find it less easy to realize that George Bernard Shaw finished this chapter without hurling the book into the fire But no! He went on reading, reading, and there were twenty-four chapters still to come

The mischief which I foresaw when I had read this "confession" has not been long in coming Biographers have seized on the picture it gives of Wilde at Oxford to create an absolutely false impression of him as he was at Oxford as an undergraduate, in their books They have not all the critical faculty of Professor Choisy In Lemonnier's book, for instance, Wilde is portrayed as the languid, flabby, self-indulgent æsthete of Harris's legend As such he will doubtless go down to posterity in the descriptions of future biographers,

unless the *Life and Confessions* is finally and completely discredited

We all know that Wilde left Oxford with a spotless reputation. Many contemporaries have borne witness to this. Harris in this chapter implies the contrary and later on quotes Mr Montagu Gattie as having told him at the Café Royal, where he and Harris had been observing Wilde in the company of two male prostitutes, that he had been at Oxford with Wilde, that he was well known at the 'Varsity as fond of such frequentations and that he had come down with a reputation "rather high, shall we call it?" (p. 154, Vol. I, *Life and Confessions*)

I don't believe that Mr Walter Montagu Gattie ever said anything of the sort, for Harris, with his usual contempt for the intelligence of his readers, represents Mr Gattie as having only recognized Wilde, as the man in the company of the lads with their "giggles," their "plastered oily hair" and their "venal leering eyes," after Harris had told him who he was. Had he known Wilde so well at Oxford as to be able to give such an account of him — but why pursue this fabrication to its *reductio ad absurdum*? Wilde, once seen, would never be forgotten. Of course Mr Gattie never spoke these words. He was the last man to whom Harris ought to have attributed them.

Wilde was not only *not* a flabby, self-indulgent candidate for a ducking off Magdalen Bridge, when he was at Oxford, but—well, let us hear what Sir Frank Benson says about him in an interview which was given to Mr Arthur Lawrence and published in *John o' London's Weekly* on May 11th, 1929. Sir Frank, who was at New College, and who was four years younger than Wilde, had probably only recently come up when he first met him, "when he had just challenged attention by winning the Newdigate prize." He said that Wilde was then one of the most physically powerful men in his college and

that "so far from being a flabby æsthete, a weedy drawing-room jester or decadent gaol-bird, there was only one man in the College (and he rowed seven in the 'Varsity Eight) who had a ghost of a chance in a tussle with Wilde"

He goes on to relate a story of how Oscar received four men who came one night "to rag Wilde and break up some of that furniture he's so proud of" Here is the rest of it

. four intruders burst into their victim's room, the others following upstairs as spectators of the game To the astonishment of the beholders, number one returned into their midst, propelled by a hefty boot-thrust down the stairs, the next received a punch in the wind that doubled him up on the top of his companions below, a third form was lifted bodily and hurled on to the heads of the spectators Then came the triumphant Wilde, carrying the biggest of the gang, like a baby, in his arms He was about Wilde's size and weight, and hefty at that But his struggles were useless, and he was borne by Wilde to his own rooms and buried by Wilde underneath a pile of the would-be ragger's fine furniture "

Sir Frank concludes that "Wilde must have been mighty fit to take on such odds as four to one, with such an overwhelming result I only saw the best side of his nature I never heard him utter a coarse word or thought "

Contrast the Wilde depicted above by an English gentleman and artist, who is also an athlete, with the Wilde evolved from the malicious inventions of Harris Wilde has left Oxford and has come to London to seek fame and fortune and Harris weeps over the terrible disadvantage at which he is going to be for this fight, as compared with what he would have been if he had looked after his body properly and developed himself as the "majority of English 'Varsity men do, who devote themselves to athletic sports", and he points out that 'Varsity athletes usually succeed in life because "a Spartan discipline proves itself incomparably superior to Greek accidence." According to this biographer Wilde "knew nothing of this discipline He was the perfect flower of academic study and

leisure " He appears to have lived the life of Hannibal at Capua, in the sensuous delights that surrounded him at Magdalen where he had been "taught luxurious living" and where he had learned the "delight of indulging expensive tastes " And pages of ill-informed rubbish like this about the Wilde we have just seen defending his rooms and his blue china against a gang of four ruffians, an athlete among athletes, whom Harris describes, now as "full-fed with cloistered triumphs," again as "pleasure-loving, vainly self-confident and weak," and again as a "cultured, honour-loving Sybarite "

Thus Harris, and thus no doubt the biographers to come Shaw has by now come to this passage on the Wilde as turned out by Magdalen, and surprise and doubt may be wrinkling his brows, for he has seen and knows of the average Oxford man that he has mighty little chance of developing into a pleasure-loving Sybarite there, especially when he is obliged, as Wilde was, to practise strict economy But he has Harris's word for all this and goes on reading, reading

And when he has finished his reading, reading, and is writing the letter to Harris of which so much has been made to boom this worthless book, and he is giving his analysis of Wilde's character, he writes as a preliminary to the passage where he says that Wilde ended as an "unproductive drunkard and a swindler" the following words of lofty wisdom and insight:

Externally, in the ordinary action of life as distinguished from the literary action proper to his genius, he was no doubt sluggish and weak because of his giantism

And though he had not read Sir Frank Benson's above account at the time, he must certainly have read—because he includes it amongst the books that Harris wipes out—both my *Unhappy Friendship* and *The Real Oscar Wilde*, in both of which I have told the story of how, to give Frank Miles the time to escape through his studio window, he held the door against two Scotland Yard men with his back against it

Eh, bien! Monsieur George Bernard Shaw! On reading the interview in *John o' London* I wrote to Sir Frank to ask his permission to quote him on Wilde as an athlete in this book, and reminded him how fifty years ago I had called on him for a job in his company, and how he had graciously engaged me then and there, though stagefright prevented me from taking advantage of his kindness. He wrote me he well remembered our interview and especially my "very fine white friend" (a bull-terrier I had brought down from Oxford). He confirmed what he had told the interviewer and gave me the name of the Oxford blue who was the only other man at Magdalen who would have had any chance in a tussle with Oscar Wilde. He wrote that this man, "himself a fine athlete," used to tell him of Wilde's muscularity and strength. He adds "Americans who used to meet him on his lecture tour in the States, were astonished also at the great strength that lurked under that somewhat lazy and languid air that he put on." He agrees with me that it was sheer insanity that caused the tragedy of Wilde's life "the pathetic result of inherited tendencies amidst conditions that led not to their cure but to their development."

Harking back to Wilde as an athlete, I never once heard him refer even indirectly to his great physical strength. When Pierre Louÿs had written to decline his further acquaintance and he expressed a wish to punish him for this insult, he regretted that he had not learned the use of arms so as to be able to "teach these fellows a lesson." It is needless to say that he never once used his strength against his aggressors, even under the strongest provocation. And when Frank Harris backs up Lord Queensberry in his insolent boast that on the occasion when he called at 16 Tite Street, to expostulate with Wilde about his friendship with Bosie, Wilde showed the white feather, Harris is as usual lying and traducing his friend. Wilde could with the greatest ease have taken Queensberry

by the scruff of his neck with one hand and Queensberry's "friend" with the other hand, and have landed them outside in Tite Street each on his several ear; and I think it is a pity he did not do so. It would have taught the noble Marquis the lesson that he stood badly in need of and inspired him with respect for the "flabby æsthete," and very probably have prevented him from attacking him further—and spared us all these tears.

Wilde had the clemency of the very strong

Refreshed by his oratorical moralizing on a subject of which he obviously knows less than nothing, Harris now (p. 56) turns to my biography and transfers from the same page 159 there (where to camouflage his venial plagiarism about Oscar in masquerade he re-christened Mrs. Morrell's husband by the name of "George" so dear to him, and gave an ampler sound to the name of the Hall where the ball took place), the essence of the following paragraph:

Later on Society forced him to assume another *travesti*, which in its essential features was not dissimilar to the one he had assumed when he went up to London in the rôle of a "Professor of *Æsthetics* and Art critic," as Foster describes him in his *Alumni Oxoniensis*.

Harris again camouflages this trifling transfer by writing that it was Wilde himself, and not Foster, who was responsible for this description, which Harris qualifies as "infinitely ludicrous and pathetic," proceeding to give five or six pages to justify this condemnation. The two adjectives might be aptly applied to Harris's disquisitions here. "Ludicrous and pathetic" most certainly is his account of Wilde's débuts in London. He describes Salisbury Street, Strand (afterwards pulled down to make room for the Hotel Cecil), where Wilde had his first lodgings in London, as "a very Grub Street for a man of fashion." It was, of course, nothing of the sort. Salisbury Street in the early eighties, if slightly less "classy" than its sister, Cecil Street (the property was part of the London estate



of the Marquis of Salisbury), was quite a good address, quite as good as any in the adjoining Adelphi, as possibly Mr Shaw might remember. The rooms were kept by retired butlers and people of that sort, accustomed to cater for the wants of the gentry if not for "men of fashion." Of course Oscar never at that time posed as a man of fashion and it is too absurd of Harris to suggest it after informing his deluded readers some pages back that Wilde had already adopted his ridiculous æsthetic costume, and making Wilde tell us himself that at that time he was reforming fashion.

Equally ludicrous and pathetic is Harris's statement that on his arrival in London Wilde "stepped boldly into the limelight, going to all the 'first-nights'." He does not explain how an unsuccessful journalist, as higher up he has described Wilde, living in what he has qualified as Grub Street, yet obliged to posture (and dress) as a "man of fashion" who had only very small means, could manage the "limelight" and the *premieres*. Wilde certainly did frequent the theatres and possibly did compass a few first-nights, but let Ellen Terry tell us in what way. She was speaking—it was at a time when to pronounce Oscar Wilde's name in public was to court ostracism, but Dame Ellen was always as courageous as she was beautiful—at a meeting of the Gallery First Nighters' Club, and this is what she said:

"In the gallery and pit at the dear old Lyceum, there used to be seen faces of many men who had won or were about to win distinction in the world—the Burne-Joneses, the Justin McCarthy's, Alfred Gilbert, the great sculptor, the late Oscar Wilde, the poet O'Shaughnessy."

My quite rational deduction from this, quoted in my *Life*, was that "in the days when Oscar Wilde was writing his verse, he was not a prosperous man" and that "the young man whose circumstances force him to go to the pit or the gallery of the theatre *à la mode* will find difficulty in storming the fortresses of the British aristocracy."

If Harris had studied my biography throughout with the care which he sometimes gave to his marauding excursions into my books, he might have spared himself the ridicule of featuring poor, needy Oscar Wilde as ruffling it at *premieres* in a way that calls up reminiscences of the gorgeous Arnold Bennett of *The Diary*. I regret it all the more because I notice that for this same paragraph he did go, farther down, to one of my books, namely the *Unhappy Friendship*, and records in almost my *ipsissima verba* that "never a bitter word fell from those smiling lips." Harris rather fancied this observation of mine because I notice that he uses it again, clumsily camouflaged of course, at the end of his book. I notice still further (on p. 68) that he speaks of the divine Ellen Terry's admiration for Wilde and quotes her as saying "she was more impressed by the genius of Oscar Wilde and of Whistler than by that of any other man," so that—with her *Reminiscences* at his elbow—he had still less excuse for his ludicrous and pathetic nonsense about Wilde as a First-nighter.

## CHAPTER VII

### DID SHAW MEAN "VIPER"?

DURING the magnificent days when the "man of fashion," who was also an unsuccessful journalist living in Grub Street, was ruffling it so splendidly in the pit of the Gaiety or the gallery of the Lyceum, Harris did not know Wilde. He only arrived in London in 1883. It is only some pages later on in his biography that we come to his description of when and where he first met him. We shall come to that description later on.

It is such that, taking it together with many of the preceding malicious misstatements about Wilde—I say nothing about the appalling slanders farther on—I found myself laying his book down and recalling all I knew of Harris, asking myself most earnestly whether in writing this book, besides the obvious purpose of making money, he had not the further motive of paying off old scores against his friend, whether for many years past he had not harboured grievances against Wilde. On the one hand, we know that his constant attempts to batten on Wilde's brain, especially after his downfall, were not always successful, and as a business man he may have resented both the slight implied and a certain loss of invested time and capital. But there might have been a sharper and more compelling incentive—the constant rankling of wounded vanity.

During the last few weeks we have read over and over again in the reviews of Harris's book on Shaw the remark attributed to Wilde about Harris as a diner-out. And then, of course, there is the conversation he overheard at the Hôtel

des Bains, la Napoule, in January, 1898, when Wilde was telling Mellor how absurd it was of Harris to boast of his social position in London, which was nothing as compared to what his own had been, and that Frank Harris was specially ridiculous when he talked about literature "Fancy a Jeremiad preached by a man in a fur-coat! Frank's comic" Harris professes to have eavesdropped on this occasion with a magnanimous smile on his face, listening to the man whom he was loading with benefits, sneering at him to a perfect stranger. He says that this showed him what Wilde really thought of him, but, morbidly vain as he was, would have us believe he did not resent it.

It seems to me certain that Harris bitterly resented Wilde's sneer, and though he posed to the last as Wilde's friend, admirer and ungrudging benefactor he may all the time have wished to avenge himself. We have had in Wilde's unhappy career many instances of how bitterly he was made to pay for his *bons mots* against other people. In Corsica we murder for a wound to vanity, usually with a bullet from behind a wall; in England the feeling of revenge is quite as bitter and the methods perhaps equally fatal, if not so direct. I think the best example of this is to be found in the leading article which Sir Edwin Arnold wrote in the *Daily Telegraph* for April 6th, 1895, on the night of Wilde's arrest at the Cadogan Hotel after the collapse of the Queensberry prosecution.

It was a most vituperative article and even at a time when everybody had cast aside that sense of British fair play of which we are so proud it did evoke some sympathy for the man thus pilloried. It was thought not cricket to attack a man in such a way at the very moment when he was faced with a criminal trial, and on the very morning on which the article appeared was to take his place in the dock at Bow Street. People wondered what could have impelled Sir Edwin to violate thus one of the stringent rules of British journalism.

It was known that the then proprietor of the paper had serious reasons for grave displeasure against Wilde, but it seemed quite certain that in this matter Sir Edwin had acted entirely on his own initiative. One could hardly attribute it to the editor's righteous indignation on moral grounds, for reasons into which it is not necessary to enter here. An explanation which was given was that Arnold had never forgiven Wilde for a slighting remark about some literary work of which he was vastly proud.

On December 11th, 1888, Oscar Wilde had reviewed in the *Pall Mall Gazette* a book called "*With Sa'di in the Garden, or the Book of Love*, by Sir Edwin Arnold, M A , A C I E , author of *The Light of Asia*, etc (Trubner)." The review was headed "Sir Edwin Arnold's Last Volume," and this was Wilde's *mot d'esprit* which provoked seven years later Sir Edwin Arnold's philippic in the *Daily Telegraph*.

Sir Edwin Arnold has translated Sa'di and someone must translate Sir Edwin Arnold.

The review was of course anonymous, but everybody in Fleet Street knew who the writer must be.

I remember thinking and saying at the time, when people were wondering as to the ferocious tone of the *Daily Telegraph* leader and this seven-year-old review was recalled, that *Sa'di* might have suggested *Sade*, and the famous Marquis such unnatural cruelty.

Here is some of the abuse that Sir Edwin Arnold hurled at the wretched man who at that moment was lying in a cell in Bow Street Police Station, utterly disgraced, hopelessly ruined and with years of torture and abject poverty before him as his only prospect. The article begins

Hardly had the Queensberry trial recommenced yesterday, when Sir Edward Clarke withdrew from the hopeless task of maintaining his unworthy client's case, and the miserable impudence of the prose-

cutor's charge collapsed. The jury, directed by the Court, wanted not so much as one minute's consideration to find that the statement made by the Marquis of Queensberry was true in fact and that its publication in the form of the alleged libel was for the public benefit, with the consequent verdict of "Not Guilty." The Judge did not attempt to silence or reprove the irrepressible cheering in the Court which greeted the acquittal of this sorely provoked and cruelly injured father. As for the prosecutor, whose notoriety has now become infamous, he made no appearance yesterday upon the scene and he has since been arrested at the instance of the Treasury on a charge of a very grave character. This being so, as regards any further influence which he can exercise upon social, literary, or artistic matters, and the contempt and disgust felt for such a character being fully met by the hideous downfall of the man and of his theories, we may dismiss the prisoner without further remark. We have had enough, and more than enough of Mr. Oscar Wilde, who has been the means of inflicting upon public patience during this recent episode as much moral damage of the most hideous and repulsive kind as no single individual could well cause.

If the general concern were only with the man himself—his spurious brilliancy, inflated egotism, diseased vanity, cultivated affectation and shameless disavowal of all morality—the best thing would be to dismiss him and his deeds without another word to the penalty of universal condemnation.

And so on

When one has seen the editor of the most important paper in London publishing such an article, against all the elements of justice, fair play and even legality, prompted merely by pique for a trivial, anonymous gibe, one may well pause to wonder whether some such motive may not also have prompted Harris to write his book about Wilde, all the more readily so that nobody could frequent Harris without detecting in him a distinct type of the class which Henri Becque depicted in his play *Les Faux Bonshommes*. For Harris's *bonhomme* rang as base metal, his verbal hospitality—Crosland may be read on this in one of the last articles he ever wrote, in "Public Interest"—usually proved itself a sham, and where his friends

and admirers saw in him a Christ-inspired Crusader ever ready to couch a lance in defence of the poor and oppressed, the shrewd and uncozened observer beheld rather the *Landsknecht*, the mercenary and, if the wage were high enough, the bravo. This last book of his certainly seems to justify the latter view of his character and aims in life.

To revert to Sir Edwin Arnold's article for a moment, it is perhaps of interest to record that almost exactly ten years after he had so denounced Oscar Wilde and had, in such scathing terms, consigned him to the eternal oblivion of the unmentionable, there appeared in this same *Daily Telegraph*, to wit in April, 1905, a review of a book which had been issued privately three years previously, and in that discreet form had won throughout the whole world a humane reconsideration of the *non inter Christianos nominandus*, for a reason which the reviewer indicates. This is a copy of the significant part of this notice.

It is certainly pathetic and undeniably interesting. It is well written, too, and in parts rises to the dignity of real literature. For all that, we venture to think that it would have been better if the "story" had never been written, or, if written it must be, it had been restricted to that "discreet method of publication" which gave it private circulation only. As it is, it will, we imagine, be regarded as something in the nature of a challenge. It is a great thing to have a high opinion of a friend, a greater thing still to stick to this ideal, through good and evil report, and no one will blame the author for his attempt to do justice to the memory of one whom he regards as a bright genius of the last century in whom the "allied madness" once got the upper hand. For our part, we have no fault to find with the language in which the author couches his vindication, for, barring certain references, foolish rather than anything else, to the British character, there is nothing to which one can take exception in the whole book. The personal sketches of the man are extremely good and telling. He tells many interesting little anecdotes of Wilde which are very suggestive of his peculiar affectations at the time. We quote one or two

## DID SHAW MEAN "VIPER"?

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A large part of this little book is devoted to the tragedy of Wilde's career. This is a matter we cannot enter upon here

Thus—about the little book that coming out less than two years after Wilde's death, prepared the world for *De Profundis* and encouraged Meyerfeld and then Ross to publish Wilde's manuscript—a writer in the same office in which Wilde and his works had been consigned as unmentionable to eternal disregard

That was twenty-seven years ago and meanwhile the little book has gone on and on, and others have been reading, reading, reading. Here, for instance, is a letter that its author received ten years ago, just a quarter of a century after he had laid down his pen after writing it

It came to him from a Parisian woman of the world, a lady highly distinguished in French literature, whose second name proves that it was critical acumen, nay, almost cynical judgment of men and their motives and a strong distaste for pretence and sentiment, that could be looked for in the household in which she was reared from childhood. For it is the daughter of Clémenceau, the "Tiger," who wrote this letter, the same Madeleine Jacquemaire who, presenting her *Pot de Basilic* to the author reviewed above, wrote in it "*En remerciement de son livre si profond sur le grand Oscar Wilde*" (In gratitude for his so profound book on the great Oscar Wilde)

Her letter, which only reached the author some months after she wrote to him—and that by a miracle of international post office efficiency—runs as follows

. 19, RUE DARU, VIII<sup>e</sup>.

PARIS, 9 Avril 1927.

MONSIEUR,

Je viens de lire votre livre sur Oscar Wilde et j'en ai été si touchée que j'éprouve le besoin de vous le dire



C'est comme vous le dites, l'histoire d'une amitié malheureuse — mais aussi d'une bien belle et profonde amitié. Rien n'y manque, même pas la suprême amertume de la lettre affreusement injuste où l'ami auquel vous aviez été ni fidèle vous accuse de parler mal de lui "derrière son dos"

Il fallait un grand cœur, Monsieur, pour conserver pur un si beau sentiment à travers de pareilles épreuves. Il fallait aussi que Oscar Wilde eût de quoi l'inspirer. Il fallait enfin un talent touchant et simple pour conter cela au public. Vous avez fait à vos lecteurs un honneur de noble qualité en lui parlant si ouvertement. Pour ma part, je vous en ai une vraie reconnaissance et me permets de vous le dire en toute bonne foi. Votre livre m'a émue—j'aime à le dire à vous et à mes amis. J'ai toujours beaucoup admiré les œuvres d'Oscar Wilde, qui était plein de génie. J'avoue que ce que je pouvais savoir (d'après ce qui a été écrit) de son caractère m'avait en général horripilée. Vous ne niez rien des faits, cependant, je ne sais comment—il se trouve que, le livre fermé, une impression toute autre et qui paraît plus juste, succède à l'ancienne. C'est un bienfait de l'amitié et vous aimerez à penser que vous l'avez réalisé.

Peut-être vous ai-je rencontré jadis sans le savoir, chez certaines des personnes que vous avez connues à Paris, et qui étaient des amis communs—Georges Hugo, par exemple.

Mais un livre comme le vôtre vaut bien plus qu'une rencontre. C'est ce livre, si beau, qui est le sujet de ma lettre—lettre si hasardeusement adressée que je ne sais si elle vous arrivera jamais.

Veuillez croire, Monsieur, à l'expression sincère de ma sympathie et de mon admiration

MADELEINE CLÉMENCEAU JACQUEMAIRE.

of which the following is the translation.

DID SHAW MEAN "VIPER"?

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19 RUE DARU, VIII<sup>e</sup>,

PARIS, 9 April 1927.

DEAR SIR,

I have just finished reading your book on Oscar Wilde, and I have been so touched by it that I feel I must write and tell you so

It is, as you say, "the story of an unhappy friendship," but the friendship is a very deep and beautiful one. Nothing is lacking in it, not even the supreme bitterness of the atrociously unjust letter in which the friend to whom you had been so faithful accuses you of speaking badly of him "*behind his back*."

It required a great heart, sir, to preserve unalloyed so fine a feeling athwart so sharp a test. It was requisite also that Oscar Wilde should have in him the power of inspiring such a feeling. There was required, in fine, a touching and simple talent to tell it all to the public. You have paid your readers an honour of noble quality in speaking so openly. As for me, I am truly grateful to you for it and I take the liberty of telling you so in all good faith. Your book has touched me—I want you and all my friends to know this. I have always admired the works of Oscar Wilde, who was full of genius. I admit that all I had heard about his character (from what had been written about him) had generally speaking horrified me. You don't deny any of the facts, nevertheless—I am sure I do not know how or why—it so happens that when the book has been laid down, quite a different impression, which appears to be a more just one, takes the place of the former impression. This is one of the benefactions of friendship, and you will like to know that you have achieved it.

I fancy I may have met you formerly without knowing it—at the houses of people you knew in Paris who were mutual friends—at Georges Hugo's, for instance.

But a book like yours is worth far more than any social

## GEORGE, FRANK AND OSCAR

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contact. It is your book—so beautiful—which is the subject of my letter—a letter addressed so haphazardly that I am not at all sure that it will ever come into your hands

Please believe, sir, in the sincere expression of my sympathy and my admiration.

MADELEINE CLÉMENCEAU JACQUEMAIRE

The book reviewed in the *Daily Telegraph* on April 21st, 1905, and written about in the above letter in 1927 by the daughter of Georges Clémenceau, is my *The Story of An Unhappy Friendship*, originally published privately in 1902.

It is one of the books that Harris's biography of Wilde has, according to George Bernard Shaw, utterly wiped out. This would be a depressing prospect, except for the consolation I find in the thought that some of the best passages in it, some of my phrases and thoughts, will continue to survive in Harris's book, which, again according to Shaw, is to live as long as Wilde's memory is handed down to remote posterity. So I shall not perish altogether *Non omnis moriar*!

This reflection is, as Mr Pecksniff once said, "also very soothing," and all the more so as having lately been reading my Sigmund Freud again, I have sometimes wondered, not from any personal alarm but from mere curiosity, whether when George Bernard Shaw assigned to his friend Harris his abstersive literary rôle, this may not have simply been the involuntary, almost automatic result, of one of those subconscious mental processes which Freud describes in his book on memory. It has occurred to me that, having read Harris's sacrilegious attack on Wilde's honoured mother, on his respected friend Pater, on Constance, his wife (a particularly spiteful diatribe) and on the brother whom, in spite of all, Oscar loved and admired, and whom Harris foully traduces, there may not have registered themselves in the inner sanctum of Shaw's

brain, where his memory of Æsop's Fables would be duly stored, the two words:

### HARRIS—VIPER

illustrating some impression of such a snake striking its poison-fangs into the bosom which had sheltered and fostered it.

I remembered next that Shaw is fond of using the Cockney pronunciation and that in London, "v"s are pronounced by the *hoi polloi* as "w"s, so that the chances were Harris might be inscribed on the "memory deltas" of Shaw's archives as:

### HARRIS—WIPER

Now, a wiper wipes That function is his *raison d'être*  
So that when Shaw, naturally rather muzzy after reading Harris's book through "at one sitting," which would involve even such a superman in at least ten hours' steady perusal (allowing 250 words to the minute) may in this way have come, when writing his 6,000-word letter to Harris just after he had laid down the 150,000 words of reading-matter, to attribute to his friend the suggested rôle of Obliterator, of the Wiper-Out

It was, by the way, on an occasion on which Wilde and I were together for luncheon at Marguéry's restaurant on the boulevards, that in the course of describing a Freudian process of memory-links, my friend for the only time during the seventeen years that I knew him suggested ever so faintly the snobbishness of which he has been so freely—and I consider, so unjustly—accused by Harris, Shaw and others. We had ordered lunch and had trifled with the hors d'œuvres (which did not include caviare because Wilde heartily disliked it, in spite of Harris's sneer) and were waiting for the first course, when to pass the time I suggested to Wilde that it would be rather amusing for us to find out what a certain large *émail cloisonné* jar, on the peculiar hideousness of which we had

earlier commented, might suggest to our memories, link by link. When at last Oscar reeled off the succession of his reminiscences set afoot by the ugly jar, he came somehow or other to "Gladys, Countess of Lonsdale" Unlike Harris I was not making "notes" in those days of all he said and so only remember the reference to the *grande dame*, and have since as much regretted this forgetfulness as I have of all the winged words which Victor Hugo once addressed to me, when he had caught me raiding his plum-tree in the garden at Hauteville House, Guernsey

"And what was your *suite d'idées*?" then asked Oscar.

"Oh, I don't remember," I said, "I had got as far as Bibi-la-Purée and got to thinking that our waiter is a jolly long time in bringing us our *filets de soles Marguéry*!"

And "What a brute you are!" cried Oscar Wilde.

My reference to Bibi-la-Purée, the famous outcast of the Latin quarter, was, of course, intended as a mild chiding for the "Gladys, Countess of Lonsdale"

When I think of how Wilde looked in those early days and compare my remembrance of that athletic and Apollo-like figure and the singular beauty of the face lit up by genius and good nature, and contrast it with the corporeal picture which Harris gives of him at their first meeting at Lady St Helier's (pp 91, 92)—so disparaging, so obviously, spitefully untrue—I cannot help reverting to the opinion that Harris never liked him at all, was never his friend, was indeed his secret enemy, who saw in a venomous biography in which he would entirely misrepresent and traduce him, the opportunity of making large sums of money and at the same time of gratifying a year-long resentment

It was after reading this description of Wilde by Harris that, for only that one time, I broke my resolution not to say or do anything to denounce Harris's book, to interfere with "the frail, old man" or to interrupt him in the enjoyment of

very much more than thirty pieces of silver. Hearing from Clémenceau's daughter that she had come to a kindlier and juster opinion about the unhappy man whom Shaw had described as having ended as "a drunkard and a swindler," and about whom Harris and Davray (who both professed to have been his warm friends and admirers) were through the translated *Life and Confessions* prompting Paris—as instanced by the published words of Maître Théry, *inter alios*—to regard him as a "vulgar debauchee, an *escroc*, an *ivrogne*, a *menteur*, heaping every kind of infamy on his own head," I decided that I ought to prevent her from being influenced by the awful miasma with which in the Paris of to-day his memory had been befouled

So I wrote her a short note and was glad to read in her answer the following assurance

J'ai été très frappée de ce que vous m'avez écrit au sujet du livre de F. Harris que je n'ai pas lu, et que certes, je ne lirai pas. En revanche je raconterai autour de moi ce que vous m'en dites. Combien je comprends votre indignation! Je me rappelle avec admiration le livre, si beau, pour lequel je vous ai écrit et j'ai parlé de vous avec mon amie d'enfance Mme Herman Paul—que vous avez connue quand elle était Mme Georges Hugo

It was refreshing to hear that there was at least one distinguished house in Paris where Mr. Frank Harris, chaperoned by Wilde's former beneficiary, Henry D. Davray, would never be allowed to play the rôle of "The Gentleman With The Duster" assigned to him by Mr. Bernard Shaw.

## CHAPTER VIII

### "WILDE AT WHISTLER (HARRIS INTERVENING)"

THE farther one progresses into Harris's book, the more impressed is one with the fact that he knew very little about the subject of his biography, and that he never took the slightest trouble to ascertain any truth where his imagination could be called into play and where invention could replace research. Instead of laboriously routing out authentic documents he thought it quite sufficient for his purpose to use any books, including mine, that he could lay hands upon, to camouflage his plagiarisms from them and let guess-work do the rest. His object after all was not to give a faithful biography of Oscar Wilde but to manufacture a book that would sell readily for the prurient interest it was certain to arouse, and he knew that to succeed in that he must depict Wilde, not as he really was, but as the kind of man that a malicious world wanted to hear about.

A little painstaking on Harris's part would have spared his readers the nonsense he writes about Wilde's first book of poems (pp 67, 68). We are told that having prepared the way for the success of the publication by his æsthetic masquerading and having brought it out at his own expense with a publisher called Bogue in 1881, "the book had an extraordinary success," that "Oscar had built high fantastic hopes on this book," and that these hopes, although Harris contests his claim to the title of poet, were in so far realized that the sales were large, that four editions were disposed of in a month

and that Wilde actually made quite a good profit out of the venture. Thus Harris

The facts are that only 750 copies were first printed (June, 1881) and that each of the three editions which came out in 1881 consisted of 250 copies only, of which a large number were sent out for the reviewers, so that the first edition must have consisted of barely 200 copies. On January 24th, 1882, a second printing was considered warranted and Wilde ordered another 500 copies from the printers, of which 250 copies each formed the fourth and fifth editions. The public demand had, however, practically died out and when in August of that year David Bogue became bankrupt there was a large stock of unsold sheets on hand which were transferred to Messrs Chatto and Windus (whose office was a kind of Home for Lost Poets). These gentlemen kept the *Poems* before the public for seven years in their catalogue, but without much result, as in 1892 220 or 230 copies in "sheets" were taken over from them by Messrs Elkin Mathews and John Lane, to be issued as The Author's Edition. Altogether if in the first year about 400 copies of the *Poems* were sold it took more than eleven years to bring the total of the sales of the book up to less than 900 copies, the profits on which to Wilde, who figures in the agreement with Bogue as "The Proprietor," after he had paid for the expensive paper, printing and white parchment bindings and had allowed Bogue his 10 per cent commission and his "13 copies as 12," would be so small as to be negligible. I remember asking David Bogue, in 1892, when he was working as business-manager in the *Daily Graphic*, whether Wilde hadn't done pretty well out of his publishing venture, and he only shook his head and laughed. Still, there are not very many poets in the world who could point to a sale of 400 copies at 10s 6d "per" in six months.

At that time—1881—there was only one man living in London who was an assured customer for the publishers of



the first volumes of new and untried poets and that was André Raffalovitch, a young millionaire living in splendour in Park Lane who avenged himself later on Oscar Wilde for one or two gibes about his personal appearance and his social success by breaking up a new friendship to which Wilde attached great value

For his account of the reception of the book by the London reviewers Harris saves himself all trouble by simply copying my very words. I deemed it unnecessary to cite more than the opinions, or rather extracts from them, of the two literary journals which in 1881 carried some weight with the trade and the public, namely the now defunct *Athenæum* and the *Saturday Review*. I quoted the latter's review first and that of the *Athenæum* afterwards. Harris, ever skilled in camouflage, quotes the latter first and the *Saturday* lower down.

I wrote, introducing this review

The *Athenæum* gave the book the place of honour in its number for the 23rd of July.

Frank Harris writes, introducing this review

The *Athenæum* gave the book the place of honour in its number for the 23rd of July.

He lifts my citation "Mr Wilde's volume of poems may be regarded as the evangel of a new creed. From other gospels it differs in coming after, instead of before, the cult he seeks to establish. . . . We fail to see, however, that the apostle of the new worship has any distinct message."

Still with a view to camouflage, he paraphrases my "The charge of imitation is particularly insisted upon," into "nearly all the book is imitative," which he quotes as taken from the review—which it is not—and winds up by quoting the first lines of my concluding citation "Work of this character has no element of endurance."

He carefully omits everything that the reviewer wrote in

favour of the book which, of course, I had been at pains to transcribe. As for instance: “Turning to the execution of the poems, there is something to admire Mr Wilde has a keen perception of some aspects of natural beauty Single lines might be extracted which convey striking and accurate pictures ”

Of course he omitted this He wasn't out to show Wilde, the poet His job was with a Wilde, a pervert

In his manipulation of my excerpt from the *Saturday* he follows me just as closely, but emphasizes the reviewer's parting fling

I wrote “ the *Saturday Review* contemptuously disposed of the book in a few sentences at the end of an article on ‘Recent Poetry ’ It begins ‘Mr Wilde's verses belong to a class which is the special terror of the reviewers, the poetry which is neither good nor bad ’ ” I gave some typical *Saturday* Reviewing about the book and terminated my quotation with the words:

Strong exception is next taken to the sensual tone of the poems, and the review concludes with the following “This book is not without traces of cleverness, but it is marred everywhere by imitation, insincerity and bad taste ”

Harris informs his readers that “the *Saturday Review* dismissed the book at the end of an article on ‘Recent Poetry,’ ‘as neither good nor bad ’ The reviewer objected in the English fashion to the sensual tone of the poems, but summed up fairly enough. “This book is not without cleverness, but is everywhere marred by imitation, insincerity and bad taste ’ ”

I did not in the least object, at the time when I first noticed it, to the use he made here of my book I know something of “the intolerable weight of the pen” and of the fatigue of searching through files and of “shifting documents from one place to another,” as my friend Henri Céard once said to me as we were looking in at the reading-room in the Musée Carna-

valet, watching the Nethinim of letters at their wretched tasks. He was heartily welcome to my materials for a decent construction, even without any acknowledgement. This is the attitude I took up in the letter I sent to M. André Maurois, which he published in *Le Mercure de France* in part answer to Harris's savage attack on him as a plagiarist. It simply stated that Maurois was quite justified in taking from Harris what Harris had taken from me. I considered that Maurois had been badly treated by the *Mercure*. And I am glad Harris never answered Maurois's letter and mine, because he might have provoked me into saying what circumstances and Mr Bernard Shaw are forcing me to say now.

I will add that probably enough my disinclination to "revive an unspeakable grief," as well as a certain dislike of hard work, would, even in spite of the provocation alluded to above, have prompted me to the *lascia corre* of Corsican philosophy had I not heard quite recently that Frank Harris's heirs are leaving no stone unturned to issue a British edition of the *Life and Confessions* in London. This has at last been made possible by the mansuetude and gallantry of Lord Alfred Douglas, who has withdrawn his interdict on this publication provided Harris's "New Preface" is included, as well as the corrections which Lord Alfred wished to make. If, as seems probable, this book is shortly published in England, it is essential that the public should know what credence can be attached to Harris's statements about Wilde.

At the end of his quotations from my book about Wilde's poems, Harris adds a line or two of criticism of his own and tells us that "there was not a memorable word, or a new cadence or a sincere cry in the book." When I read this I could not help remembering a letter that reached me in Naples in 1881 from a gentleman who afterwards highly distinguished himself in a diplomatic career, which led him to a title and an ambassadorship, and who himself is a poet of exquisite parts.

In this letter, writing to me a stranger, he wrote in high praise of "Oscar Wilde's wonderful book of poems" and urged me to acquire a copy at once. This was something that I was unable to do, as at that time I was ferrying passengers to the Capri and other steamers for embarkation and debarking, and that my tariff of *due soldi* (1*d*) a head and *un' batocco* ( $\frac{1}{2}$ *d*) for each parcel or market-basket (*ehou' ehou'*—) did not leave any margin for the purchase of volumes of poems at 10*s* 6*d* (or more than 250 *batocchi*), representing the transportation by Nethinim methods of more than 250 heavily-laden market-baskets!

The succeeding pages of Harris's book teem with inaccuracies, guesses, contradictions. Indeed except when Harris is theorizing or playing the Chadband, or, worst of all, performing the ventriloquist with the corpse of a dead friend as his puppet, dragged out of a dishonoured grave to be made to enunciate confessions of infamy "for the delight of the Sty-Children," there is hardly a page in the whole book which is free from these blemishes, of which many proceed from sloth and carelessness, but too many, also, alas! from a deliberate intention of besmirching his dead friend.

Just after his sage remarks on Wilde's poems he goes on to say that it was Willy Wilde who announced in the *World* (Nov. 9th, 1881) that "owing to the astonishing success" of his *Poems* his brother had "been invited to lecture in America."

For this misrepresentation with its implication of sheer dishonesty on the part of the Wilde brothers, Harris has no excuse whatever. He had the text of the *World* paragraph before him in my *Life* (p. 189) and he has wilfully altered it for the sake of his innuendo. He knew that nobody but Yates himself was allowed to use the editorial "I" in the "Entre Nous" paragraphs of the *World* and he also knew that Willy Wilde was not on the staff of the journal but only a contributor and did not have the power to insert such a puff, did not write it,

in short He knew further that Yates neither wrote of the "astonishing success" of Oscar's poems, nor that he "had been invited to lecture in America," and invented both these lies to ridicule his friend Yates wrote "Mr Oscar Wilde has arranged to leave England next month for America where he will deliver lectures on Art subjects Mr. Wilde's volume of poems, which has had a very large sale in America, will have prepared the way for him and no doubt insured him a brilliant reception in that country I hear " etc

To Wilde's tour in America—an important episode in his career—his "best" biographer devotes rather less than two pages of his two volumes, and of these two pages about one is taken up with his own comments on the lecturer and the lectures As regards Wilde's appearance he admits that "the lecturer was a fine figure of a man," which contrasts with the description he farther on gives of Wilde when he first met him The rest of his copy on the subject is transcribed from my book, including my quotations from articles which appeared about the Wilde lectures in the *Nation* of New York and the *Boston Evening Transcript* He names the *Nation* but assigns the other citation to "the chief Boston paper," so as to mask the source whence he had taken his information

But it is lower down on this same page that he shows again ignorance of matters which vitally concerned Wilde's career, and his total indifference to the reader's prescriptive right to honest and accurate information He here describes Whistler's first attack on Wilde as having been provoked by a lecture which Oscar delivered to some art students in Golden Square after his return to London in the spring of 1883, and states that this brought from Whistler the famous flier "What has Oscar in common with Art, except that he dines at our tables and picks from our platters the plums for the pudding he peddles in the provinces?"

Harris had evidently no document before him when he

wrote his misleading paragraph. He only quoted the alliterative conclusion of Whistler's spiteful and unworthy onset, doubtless from memory. I purposely refrained in my book from quoting Whistler, because I always had some liking for the man and a great admiration for the artist. It was at some sacrifice of interest in my narrative, because it was undoubtedly Whistler's attacks on Wilde's lectures as plagiarisms that put a stop to his earnings as a public lecturer, at a time when he looked to these for the support of his family, and drove him to hackwork in La Belle Sauvage Yard for a living.

The letter in which Whistler thus publicly denounces his former friend and devoted partisan was published in the *World* on November 17th, 1886. It was the copy supplied by Whistler himself to Yates of a letter which had been read a few days previously to "a large meeting of the members of the National Art Exhibition."

Thus this attack was made about three and a half years later than the date assigned to it by Harris, who has no excuse for thus antedating the unhappy quarrel between the two friends, because if he had studied my books as carefully on this subject as he did when it was to his interest to do so, he would have seen that Wilde and Whistler were great friends in 1883 and 1884. I was constantly in their company in both years and here, for instance, is a passage from my *Unhappy Friendship* (p. 89) which describes the nature of the relations between these two men at the time.

Oscar Wilde returned to town at intervals, and on more than one occasion pulled out of the pocket of his fur-coat a handful of notes and gold which he had earned so distastefully in the provinces, and told me to take what I needed. "It's as much yours as mine," he said. "You know I have no sense of property."

On these occasions of his return to town we used to dine at the Café Royal, and very often Whistler was a *convive*. We used to drink *Château des Mille-Secousses*, a claret Whistler had discovered. We were blind to the omen of its name. And though Wilde seemed to be

the arbiter at these dinners, his deference towards Whistler was very marked. He seemed to take pleasure in paying him compliments. I remember his once referring to something Whistler had done or was to do, with the expression "like the fine old-Virginian gentleman that you are" I witnessed also the exchange of much correspondence between them, repartee by letter or telegram, in which Whistler's sayings seemed to delight my friend I was with him by the way, also, when the two quarrelled, but I never heard Wilde say one word, either then or later, in resentment

The words "on these occasions of his return to town" refer to the intervals between his lectures I was then living in the same house as he was in Charles Street, Grosvenor Square; this will show the absurdity of Harris's remark that "at this time Oscar went on lecturing about the country undeterred by Whistler's attacks" There had been no attacks at that time, as I have shown—and consequently no perturbation

I have no doubt in my mind that Harris's motive in antedating Whistler's ferocious attack, with its consequent evil financial results to Oscar Wilde, was to prepare the way for his malicious statement that it was when driven by sheer necessity that Oscar Wilde married Constance Lloyd for the sake of her money

The words "Whistler's like a wasp, and carries about with him a poisoned sting," which Harris puts into Oscar's mouth in his unveracious account of the quarrel, are invented by Harris As I write above, I was with Oscar in February, 1885, when the newspaper duello between Wilde in the *P M G* and Whistler in the *World* was in progress and was actually in Wilde's company when the copy of the latter journal—dated February 25th, 1885—containing Whistler's venomous "Tenderness in Tite Street," came fresh from the press into his hands He passed it on to me after glancing at the paragraph, but as I could guess it was rather spiteful I didn't read it but asked him to show how Whistler's signature could be taken for a butterfly, a question that has always

puzzled me and does so still. Oscar, with great good humour and smiling all the time, tried to explain it by following the delicate tracery with the tip of his finger.

Harris is so much at sea on this subject that he asserts that it was in this letter that Whistler described Oscar as "the amiable, irresponsible, esurient Oscar—with no more sense of a picture than of the fit of a coat, with the courage of the opinions . of others." The fact is that this gibe is the paragraph which follows the one about picking the plums from our platters, etc., in the letter which Harris described as Whistler's attack in 1883. It appeared neither in 1883 nor in 1885, but, as I have stated, in November, 1886.

Harris says that Whistler had "the best of the argument" in this controversy in 1885. It was, as a matter of fact, Oscar who had the unanswerable last word in his letter of November 24th, 1886, where he wrote "Atlas, this is very sad! With our James 'vulgarity begins at home,' and should be allowed to stay there."

Whistler nursed his grudge against Oscar for more than three years and then attacked him again most rancorously in *Truth* on January 2nd, 1890, in which he actually brought up the 1883 lecture to the Art Students in Golden Square and charged Wilde with not having acknowledged the help he had given him in preparing this lecture. He also accused him of having appropriated one of his (Whistler's) sayings in his essay on "The Decay of Lying" in the *Nineteenth Century* for January, 1889—twelve months previously! Wilde answered this letter in the following week's *Truth*, but very sensibly left a further letter from Whistler on January 16th unanswered. For the true facts about the distressful Wilde-Whistler quarrel, which certainly calls for a biographer's careful attention, I am entirely indebted to "Stuart Mason's" admirable Bibliography.

Another most important period in Wilde's life was the time he spent in Paris in 1883. Harris knows so little about it



that he post-dates it by one year, for it was in September, 1882, that he returned to England from the States, and it was with the remnant of his American gains that he undertook his memorable trip to Paris and stayed there at the Hôtel du Quai Voltaire. It was there that I met him and that we became inseparable friends, as is all set out in the little book which Clémenceau's daughter rather likes but which I regret to say has, according to Shaw, been wiped out by Harris. This seems rather a pity because that visit played a great part in Wilde's literary development and I really did try my best to describe it faithfully. Harris dismisses the whole period—during which *The Sphinx* was written, *The Duchess of Padua* finished, dispatched and rejected by Mary Anderson, and many seeds for a fair future harvest were sown—in just twenty-five lines, of which ten are *sauce Harris* to the rest. The remaining fifteen lines contain one inaccuracy and one innuendo.

The former is where he writes that Oscar "read enormously during his months at the Hôtel Voltaire to improve his school-boyish French," and a suggestion of fibbing lies in the remark that, though Mary Anderson rejected *The Duchess of Padua*, Oscar always *said* that she had commissioned him to write it for her. And so she had, and a legal agreement duly signed, sealed and delivered was in existence by which Miss Anderson undertook to pay Oscar Wilde £1,000 for a "first-class tragedy" which was to be delivered by March 31st, 1883. Wilde received 1,000 dollars down on signing the agreement but did not send it off till late in April, which was made the technical excuse on Miss Anderson's part for not carrying out her agreement. She did not like the play and its history has not been one of success, though early in 1931 it was well received at the Paris Grand Opera, where it was used as the libretto of an opera by the musical Prix de Rome of the year. There was no call whatever to cast any doubt on Wilde's statement and no doubt Harris knew all about the agreement and in 1914

it was reproduced in Mason's Bibliography, four years previous to the 1918 edition of Harris's book

Another inaccuracy on the same page further shows Harris's ignorance about Wilde's early life in London. He says that on his return from Paris in 1883 "he took rooms again, this time in Charles Street, Mayfair," and adds some nonsense as to his reason for this change of address. He imagines that the man of fashion and first-nighter had up to then been living in "Grub Street." If he had ever troubled to document himself, he would have ascertained that already in 1881 Wilde was no longer living in Salisbury Street, for in that year he sent a copy of his *Poems* to Robert Browning with a letter dated from "Keats House, Titic Street, Chelsea." This letter, quoted by Stuart Mason (who records that in 1913 it was bought by Bernard Quaritch for £76 at Sotheby's), could as easily have been referred to by Harris as by anyone else curious about Wilde's début in London.

This fifth chapter next introduces an account of a call paid on Lady Wilde by Harris in 1884. The story is obviously as imaginary as it is malevolent. At that time Harris was only a shabbily dressed reporter on the *Evening News*. Amongst other betraying blunders he states that it was then and there that he first heard of *The Harlot's House*—which was not written till a year later—in Paris. I am an authority as I was with Oscar when he was composing it, and had as it were the virginity of the poem, or shall we say the primeur. Also æsthetic costumes were no longer worn in London by that time, 1884.

The further statement that Wilde at that time needed large sums of money to indulge his expensive tastes for "first editions, old furniture, old silver, fine pictures; Eastern carpets and Renaissance bronzes" as averred by Harris is pure balderdash. It is invented to lend credence to his disparaging version of the reason which prompted Wilde's marriage. I was living

in the same house with him in Charles Street both before and after his engagement to Constance Lloyd. The rooms on the top floor of the house were neither the "dining-room suite" nor the "parlour rooms". They were modestly furnished and reminded one, with the panelling on the walls of the front room (which commanded some mews) and their engravings of legal celebrities in black frames, of some Oxford rooms or the habitat of a struggling barrister in the Temple. It was their cheapness which had attracted Wilde there and the fact that both Mr and Mrs Davies were devoted to him.

They were excellent people to live with. Davies was a model butler and valet and Mrs Davies was a splendid cook. Oscar was as greatly liked and as faithfully served by this couple as at the end of his life he was loved and tended by M and Mme Dupoirier of the Hôtel d'Alsace. He had a way with him. I forget what the very low rental of the rooms amounted to but I do recall that we were only charged 6*d* a head for the early cup of tea and that for 3*s* 6*d* Mrs Davies sent us up a most excellent breakfast-lunch *déjeuner*, which included a bottle of respectable claret.

Wilde was spending nothing in extravagance and on one occasion had had to allow the pawnticket for the Berkeley Gold Medal to run out, which obliged him to go before a magistrate to make a statutory declaration. His silver was never "old" in his pocket, his "bronzes" were Victorian.

## CHAPTER IX

### O HENRY? OH! HARRIS

IT certainly mars the construction of Harris's narrative and spoils its credibility with most readers (or ought to have done so) that he shows us his subject contracting a mercenary marriage before he has given us a picture of the bridegroom. He tells us that Wilde, feverishly thirsting for gold, so as to be able to indulge his tastes for champagne and caviare, Eastern carpets and Renaissance bronzes, and seeing nothing before him but the shoals of poverty and dreary days when even bread would be lacking—he justly points out that “without bread, hunger is imminent,” but forgets Marie Antoinette and Monsieur Foulon on this subject—“suddenly cut the knot” and solved all his financial anxieties by marrying “a young lady without any particular qualities or beauty,” who, however, “had a few hundreds a year of her own.”

So many statements, so many untruths. Constance was pretty, she was graceful. Constance was beautiful. Constance had intelligence, artistic appreciation and all the warm and fostering qualities of the wife and the mother, and she was as much in love with Oscar Wilde as he was with her when on the November morning in Dublin he asked her to marry him. And she had not got a “few hundreds a year of her own.” She had nothing. Her father was dead and she was living with her grandfather who was devoted to her and had instituted her his heiress.

I have related in my *Unhappy Friendship* how Oscar came one early morning to my bedroom to tell me of his engagement,

my comment upon the news, his rhapsodies at our *déjeuner* about her beauty and goodness and his love for her. I have also told of how on the day after their wedding, I was introduced to the young bride at the Hôtel Wagram, of his rapture and pride, of the flowers and the message he sent her during a short absence from her side. If ever a man was in love with his bride it was poor, radiant Oscar.

It was the radiance of the delighted bridegroom, not the exultation of the mercenary schemer who had brought off a coup and found himself "sitting good" for the rest of his life because adored by a wife with means. Harris knew the facts as well as I did and no doubt had heard Oscar's amusing story of how the old grandfather, lying on what threatened to be his deathbed, no sooner had joined the hands of the young couple and given them his blessing, than, for very joy of the occasion, he suddenly blossomed out into new health and vigour. A certain sum, certainly, was handed over as Constance's dowry—much of which was spent on the Tite Street house—but "the few hundreds a year" did not come to her till much later.

To prepare us at last to meet this bridegroom face to face as seen by Harris on their first *rencontre*, Harris makes at the end of this chapter (on p. 90) an abominably false and malicious statement about him at the time of his marriage. I will quote one sentence only from this fetid farrago. "Even his marriage," he writes, "did not stifle the undertone of dislike and disgust. Now indignantly, now with contempt, men spoke of him as an abandoned creature of unnatural viciousness." And he closes this putrid paragraph with one of the choicest things in the way of a revealing anticlimax that, I think, can be found in the whole range of illiterate pasquinade.

This—according to Harris—being the London reputation of Constance's suitor, it is to such a man that her grandfather was willing to confide his cherished granddaughter's future happiness.

It was to such a husband that he was willing to hand her dowry with the prospect of his entire future inheritance. Harris had been careful to ruin the Dublin reputation of the man's parents in his first chapter, so we are not to suppose that the Lloyds approved of Constance's engagement on social grounds. We are therefore left to the supposition that Oscar Wilde, at the time he asked for the hand of Constance Lloyd on mercenary grounds, was of such great physical attraction that he had but to go a-wooing, to win. To obliterate evil family reputation, to annihilate his own fearful ill-repute, to arouse in the maiden whose wealth he coveted—being himself a pauper with wildly extravagant tastes—a passionate adoration and to win. Here is Harris's picture of him and his triumphant fascination.

He was introduced to Wilde at Lady St Helier's. All this at the time when Harris was a reporter, poor and shabby. Wilde shook hands with him in a limp way which he disliked, "His hands were flabby, greasy, and his skin looked bilious and dirty." He was also over-dressed and he "was too stout." He had a habit of "pulling his jowl" when conversing. He inspired Harris with physical repulsion and Harris lays stress on this because he thinks "most people felt it on first meeting Oscar Wilde." He admired the one feature to which Rennell Rodd in a very beautiful poem once drew attention, addressing Wilde as "You, with your wondrous eyes," and found—this is so base as to be hardly credible—*significance* in Wilde's mouth and "heavy, chiselled, purple-tinged lips." After this innuendo one hardly notices his allusion to a "black front tooth" which "shocked" Harris, possibly because he had to imagine it, as poor Oscar's front teeth were sound enough at that time and it was only much later that for a short period the disfigurement existed which enabled Ciosland to write of him as the "Lord of Language with the bad teeth." In the last years of his life in Paris his mouth presented a perfectly

normal condition, as in spite of the boundless liberalities of Harris he died owing over £100 to his landlord, and amongst other things his gold-mounted denture was on sale at his inn, so that I had an opportunity of seeing it and can speak *de visu*.

I think Harris shows very little skill in so decrying Wilde morally and physically at a time when he is asking his readers to believe that he tried to get and succeeded in getting a wife of good family who had the means to keep him in idleness and comfort

Harris soon got over his "physical repulsion" before the charm of Wilde's manner and conversation and then and there issued to him the first of the long series of invitations to meals which stud his books, without there being one single mention of any feast at which Wilde and not Petronius Harris was the arbiter. This sequence of one-sided hospitalities would incline readers to consider Wilde as a *pique-assiette*, a parasite, if one did not know that the contrary was the truth, that Wilde may have dined and wine frequently with Harris but would certainly take good care that Harris should be entertained at his (Wilde's) expense just as often. His dignity and self-respect in this matter were one of the traits in his character that I like to remember and I resent Harris's portrayal of him as a sycophant. It was always one of the faults that Oscar used to chide Willy about his ready acceptance of treating, when he was unable to reciprocate.

Also I doubt very much whether Oscar accepted that afternoon at Lady St Helier's the invitation to the Café Royal without first consulting Constance, with whom he was still much in love. I doubt all the more the story of this lunch because in narrating it (p. 94) Harris commits the blunder of putting into Wilde's mouth a witty story which he manufactures out of something Wilde was supposed to have said much later on. It was that he had been asked by a firm of American publishers for a book of 100,000 words, and that

he had answered that he could not do so, as there were not 100,000 words in the English language. But he adds that Wilde told him that the publishers in question had offered to pay him \$5,000 down in advance on his accepting this commission. Harris forgets here that only a very few pages back in his book he has depicted for us the awful pecuniary straits which had driven Wilde to a mercenary marriage and here he makes Wilde relate how he had refused £1,000 (as it was then) for the sake of a quip. Some years later he was glad to accept \$500 from Lippincott's for *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Many readers, but I shall not be of their number, will here wonder which of the two was lying.

It is here that Harris first expatiates at some length on Wilde as a talker. He reverts back and back to this subject throughout his book, but singularly fails in conveying even a faint impression of what was Wilde's chief charm. He eulogizes his conversation in every conceivable term of laudation but somehow makes one think that if Wilde talked like that—hours on end—he was the sort of fellow one would have preferred to avoid. I realize it is very difficult to do justice to the subject, as difficult as it would be, I think, to convey by description the charm of the nightingale's song. Even Wilde's witty stories seem to fall flat in the recording. The voice that told them, the eyes that lighted them up, the gesture that accompanied them are wanting, but somehow Harris gives no impression at all resembling the enthusiasm, the mental stimulus that Wilde generated in his listeners.

I remember asking myself once when I had read Harris's umpteenth rhapsody on Wilde as a talker "Now what does that passage recall to me? I know it's something somewhere, but what?" And then suddenly I came upon the word "mud-honey" which was a word poor, great O. Henry created and which Harris, *more suo*, commandeered and transferred to his vocabulary and at once I remembered



There is a certain paragraph in O Henry's story, "The Atavism of John Tom Little Bear," which is obviously a caricature of Oscar's conversational powers, and as I fancy that in his inner heart Harris always had a feeling of disparagement and contempt for Oscar Wilde I cannot help thinking that whenever he was listening to Oscar's hour-long disquisitions he had this good-humoured skit of O Henry's in the background, and that this is what prompted his descriptions of Oscar as a talker. Here is O Henry:

When it got dark me and John Tom walked back to the Corn Exchange Hotel and the four of us had supper there. I think the trouble started at that supper, for then was when Mr Little Bear made an intellectual balloon ascension. I held on to the tablecloth, and listened to him soar. That redman, if I could judge, had the gift of information. He took languages, and did with it all a Roman can do with macaroni. His vocal remarks was all embroidered over with the most scholarly verbs and prefixes. And his syllables was smooth, and fitted nicely to the joints of his idea. I thought I'd heard him talk before, but I hadn't. And it wasn't the size of his words, but the way they come, and 'twasn't his subjects, for he spoke of common things like cathedrals and football and poems and catarrh and souls and freight rates and sculpture. Mrs Conyers understood his accents, and the elegant sounds went back and forth between 'em. And now and then Jefferson D Peters would intervene a few shopworn, senseless words to have the butter passed or another leg of the chicken.

I really think that the best description of Wilde as a talker has been given by Lord Alfred Douglas in various of his writings on his unfortunate friend. There is his wonderful sonnet, for instance, "The Dead Poet", there are passages in his *Oscar Wilde and Myself* which were certainly not written by Crosland (notably on p. 43), and there is a memorable passage in his *Autobiography* at the end of Chapter 12.

And then there is, of course, Walter Pater, who in his *Bookman* review gives Wilde's faculty of talking the high praise of saying that it shows itself in his writings. In fact, he tells

us that there is always "something of an excellent talker about the writings of Mr. Oscar Wilde," and that "in his hands . . . the form of dialogue is justified by its being really alive" He adds: "His genial, laughter-loving sense of life and its enjoyable intercourse goes far to obviate any crudity that may be in the paradox with which, as with the bright and shining truth which often underlies it, Mr Wilde startling his 'countrymen' carries on more perhaps than any other writer the brilliant critical work of Matthew Arnold" He also refers to his conversational ease, the fluidity of life evinced, and his felicitous expressions

It is a fact that one can faintly recall Wilde, as one used to listen to him forty years ago, by reading his books

This first *déjeuner* at the Café Royal—in 1884—never took place Wilde did not know Harris in those days Harris has made up this meeting to impress us with his own total lack of prejudice and his fine courage to show himself entertaining at a fashionable restaurant a repulsive-looking man, who had an abominable reputation in London and had achieved nothing except—always according to Harris—some very inferior verses and two worthless plays, and who while in miserable financial circumstances was always clamouring for champagne and caviare For such is the Oscar Wilde as one pictures him from Harris's description, criticisms and comments Certainly Harris did have the pluck to entertain such a guest in such a place and he showed it, when he came to Oakley Street to take Wilde to lunch at the Café Royal in May, 1895, but that was eleven years later and in the meanwhile the unpleasant-looking poet had produced something rather superior in the world of letters Also Harris had advanced himself

Of course Harris's description of Wilde at that first meeting is a purely malicious one, invented for the purposes and schema of his book. I would like to be able to give here many of the scores of accounts I have collected from letters, conversa-

tions and printed matter of how people of every class and rank, men and women, have recorded their very first impressions of the man in those days I will quote only three. One is from André Gide's book and tells us that nobody who only met him in his last days in Paris could imagine the "prodigious being" he used to be. An Englishwoman of very high social standing and rank wrote to me "I knew him first at a Huxley dinner just after he had left Oxford. I was old enough to be his mother, but I thought I had never met so wonderful and brilliant a creature."

The last is from a lady in the Midlands, a lady of refinement and culture, who was friends with Ellen Terry and entertained Irving at her house. "I can remember him," she wrote me in 1904, "as though I had seen him yesterday. My mother was delighted with his appearance, she often afterwards spoke of his hands and his hair." Thus Oscar in 1884 when he was lecturing. She adds "It was a real distress to me to sit in that lecture-room looking at this wonderful youth and listening to his profound and beautiful words, while the rest of the audience were showing how bored they were."

So much for Harris's physical portrait of Wilde; his moral presentment of him is infinitely more cruel and misleading.

The more I think of it, the more I become convinced of the fact that Harris harboured a grudge not only against Oscar but against his unhappy wife, Constance. It would seem that Harris was not a welcome guest at 16 Tite Street, for not a single mention is made in the whole of Harris's book of his ever having lunched or dined at the Wildes' house. Yet the two volumes have many accounts of meals with Wilde, but only with Harris as the host, at Park Lane, at the Café Royal, at the Savoy, *que sais-je où encore?* Certainly but for a very venomous feeling against Constance Wilde, can one imagine Harris stooping to invent the abominable description of Wilde's married experiences with her that he puts into her husband's

mouth in the course of a purely imaginary conversation with him (p 486) at Napoule? That it was a pure fabrication discloses itself from the fact that—as later evidence has demonstrated—Harris was not with Wilde at the time, nor within five hundred miles of him, and that he only joined Wilde at Napoule several weeks later. Certainly but for some such overwhelming rancour he would have refrained from his vile aspersion on the poor girl's father and from heaping *ordure* on her lonely grave in the cemetery in Genoa (App. 587). This is a particularly bad fabrication because he actually represents Robert Ross as having corrected him on details in this filthy story!

And in his letter to Harris after reading his book through "at one sitting," George Bernard Shaw tells him that he, Harris, "could not have carried kindness"—to Wilde, "in this faithful chronicle"—"further without sentimental folly." He adds that Harris's book is "no lying epitaph," but, though he had only an hour or two previously read Harris's comments under the heading "MRS WILDE'S EPITAPH" on page 587 of the Appendix, the word "epitaph" running out under his pen did not prompt him to add to his eulogy even a faint suggestion that, leaving all questions of good taste outside, it was unfortunate that Harris should have printed the text of poor Constance's epitaph in order to bring up a lying and long-forgotten slander about her father, of whom she was proud and whose memory is revered by his descendants.

Leaving aside pages of disquisition suggested to him by the conversation at the *déjeuner* which never took place, I come to a passage (p 103) where Harris puts into Wilde's mouth words alleging that his, Wilde's, method of "winning reputation and fame, of neglecting no opportunity of turning the limelight on his own doings" was "constantly to write letters to the papers, to seize every opportunity of advertising himself." This is the exact contrary of fact. Wilde had a great objection

to the kind of reputation that comes from newspaper publicity. In this respect he differed from Whistler, who could never get his cuttings quickly enough from the agent and indeed had christened him "the tardy Romeike." Wilde was never a subscriber, to my knowledge, to any press-cutting agency. When I was staying with him in Charles Street and he saw me writing a letter and asked me whom I was writing to, I said there had been a "rotten" review of my novel in the *Whitehall Review* and I was writing to the editor to comment on his critic's remarks. Wilde said that was the very last thing I ought to do. He said "Do as I do, treat these things with silence."

I am therefore in a position to describe this passage as another of Harris's fabrications, Wilde would certainly not boast of methods which he had in abhorrence. When Harris put these words into Wilde's mouth he forgot that every letter that Wilde ever wrote to the papers has been known, recorded and classified, and that the proof confounding his malicious statement is within the reach of every reader of his book. Just let us take the two papers which in those days were the organs that gave the widest publicity in London, especially to literary men on literary matters, the *Pall Mall Gazette* and the *Daily Chronicle*. Between October 14th, 1884, and October 2nd, 1894, Mr. Wilde contributed exactly 100 papers to the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Of these, all but eleven were anonymous, one of the latter was signed "O. W.," and of the remaining ten, one or two were signed "Oxoniensis." He also had three or four signed articles amongst these. The most important letter, on "Mr. Swinburne and the *Quarterly Review*," was signed "Oxoniensis." It was only in 1894, when he was in no need of publicity of any sort, that he contributed two or three signed letters to the *Pall Mall*, including those two unfortunate letters in which he attacked Mr. T. P. O'Connor. His very last contribution to the *Pall Mall Gazette* was written shortly

afterwards (Oct. 2nd, 1894); it referred to *The Green Carnation* and was in the same tone of arrogance, which clearly indicated approaching megalomania and ought to have revealed to everybody the devilish infection that was already ravaging his magnificent brain.

In the *Daily Chronicle*, on the other hand, there appeared from first to last in Wilde's lifetime just three letters from his pen, and only the first of these, which appeared in 1890, concerned his own affairs. It was an answer to the very venomous critique in the *Daily Chronicle* of *Dorian Gray*. Of the other two letters, one was signed by his name and the other as "by the Author of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*." In neither of these two letters can Wilde be accused of seeking to puff himself and his wares, the one is "The Case of Warder Martin," and the other, published nearly a year later, is entitled "Prison Reform."

There were further, during the whole of the fifteen years of his life as a man of letters in London, one letter from his pen in the *Daily Telegraph* and two in *The Times*. One of the latter was an answer to an attack made by "An Indian Civilian", the other, to a criticism on *Salome*. There were also the two or three letters replying to Whistler in the *World* and *Truth*, four letters in the *St James's Gazette* in 1890, replying to a violent attack on *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and in 1892 a "Mr Oscar Wilde Explains" letter to the same paper. Altogether, in twenty years, twenty letters concerning himself in the London Press.

And then, of course, there is one other letter to the Press which was written at a moment of the most acute mental anguish, humiliation and terror. This was the letter he wrote from the Holborn Hotel after his lunch there with Bosie and Ross on April 5th, 1895. In this letter he endeavoured to explain his reasons for abandoning the Queensberry prosecution. It was written a few hours before his arrest. It was the one

letter he ever wrote to the *Evening News*, and was published when the warrant for his arrest had already been delivered and at the very moment when the *shirri* of Scotland Yard, set hot afoot, gyves in pocket, were on their way to the Cadogan Hotel

I am again indebted to Mr Stuart Mason's "Bibliography" for these data. They prove incontestably that Wilde never practised the vulgar methods of publicity which Harris attributes to him, and that therefore the latter has again—for purposes of disparagement, of course—fabricated the words which he puts into Oscar Wilde's mouth on a practice which he abhorred

A faithful portrait, indeed, Mr Shaw!

## CHAPTER X

### HARRIS'S "MANY INVENTIONS"

AN eminent French critic wrote of Harris's book that while Vol II is one long denunciation of Oscar Wilde—Davray by his extracts from the French reviews of the book has shown how effectual this was—the first volume is an exposure of English society "This first volume," writes M Maurice Beaubourg, "is the finer of the two, it is extraordinarily vital and forcible, it is the indictment and conviction, without any possible appeal, of the English *médiocratie* "

By this last word, which he coins himself, Beaubourg wishes to describe the British upper middle classes. He distinguishes them from the aristocracy, because Harris has led him to believe the best path to the greatest success in London society is to have well, the reputation for abnormality which he describes Wilde's name to have been associated with. Falsely, of course, as far as the years he lived in London until the early nineties are concerned. Nobody better than Harris ought to know that Wilde had no such bad reputation in London, because nobody better than Harris knew that any suspicion of anything wrong in this respect about a contributor would bolt and bar against him the office of every newspaper or review office in London. He knew that Wilde contributed regularly during the years in question to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, during most of which time it belonged to H Y Thompson. Now Henry Yates Thompson—*experto crede Roberto*, for I was for years closely connected with the *P M G*—was a man of the strictest principles and if any breath of scandal touched anybody who was a contributor, his "I won't have that man writing



for my paper" went forth, and John Morley, Stead and Cook, who were all high-principled men, would acquiesce without any question

Wilde's reputation in London was so little tarnished that we find him being solicited in 1885, the beginning of the period about which Harris is romancing, by the editor of no less a publication than the *Nineteenth Century* to contribute to the pages of this review, which has always been so highly scrupulous. We find him contributing to it again at the solicitation of the editor in 1889 and 1890, and it may be remembered how, sadly discussing his future prospects as a writer with Warder Martin in Reading Gaol just before his release, he specially stressed how his disgrace must surely have closed the doors of Kegan Paul and Trench against him. "Formerly the editor of the *Nineteenth Century* used to come round to Tite Street to beg for an article. To-day, I don't suppose he would even look at any manuscript I might send him."

Harris was for about eight years editor of the *Fortnightly Review* and during that period he published in this magazine four contributions from Wilde (1889, 1891, 1891 and 1894). These included "A Preface to Dorian Gray." He knew very well that Chapman and Hall, or rather, Oswald Crawford would never have allowed him to print any article from a man whose morality was in doubt, especially when a much higher price than usual was to be paid for the article. Newspaper and magazine publishing is a matter of business and in those days anything calculated to spoil the standing of a publication in the eyes of the public and consequently to hazard the sales was *tabu*. Then there was Yates of the *World*, actually soliciting an introduction to "Willy's brother, the Newdigate man, of whom I hear so much and so favourably." Harris knew that Wilde was a contributor to this "Society" weekly, and he knew that Yates, of all men, though certainly he did tolerate B—— for a while, was far too keen a business

man to have a disreputable person contributing to his journal. He had his eye ever fixed on the till in York Street.

And further, does Harris really want to make people believe that such a firm as the highly moral, almost Puritanical publishers of "wholesome" literature, the Messrs Cassell, Petter and Galpin of La Belle Sauvage, would have engaged Oscar Wilde as editor of one of their monthly publications and boldly have displayed his name on the cover from June, 1887, till October, 1889, if there had been the faintest rumour as to his private character? It was not that Messrs Cassell considered his a very great name likely to "boom" their *Woman's World*, and were ready to secure it *coûte que coûte*, because they offered him only the mediocre salary of £6 6s a week. They knew he was reckoned an authority on dress, furniture, house decoration and artistic matters and that he was very popular with the lady-clientèle for which they wished to cater, and so they went out and brought him back into the Yard. How little his name stank in those days—as Harris would have us believe—is very clearly shown by the distinguished band of female contributors that as editor he was able—though the pecuniary inducements he could offer were by no means attractive—to secure for the magazine, including Ouida, Olive Schreiner, Blanche Roosevelt, Marie Corelli, Lady St Helier and other peeresses, a real live Queen, who used to sign "Carmen Sylva," and what perhaps knocks Harris's falsehood completely down, a lady of the English Blood Royal, the Princess Christian.

The whole of Harris's pages describing Wilde in London up to the Queensberry scandal crawls with inaccuracies, which one cannot but consider as deliberate and calculated. There is the nonsense, for instance, which he writes about the scandal aroused by the publication in *Blackwood's Magazine* of Wilde's "The Portrait of Mr W H." About this Harris writes. "The Portrait of Mr W H" did Oscar incalculable injury. It set everyone talking and arguing. It gave his enemies for

the first time the very weapon they wanted and they used it unscrupulously and untiringly with the fierce delight of hatred." There is no truth whatever in this statement. The story was given the place of honour in *Maga* for July, 1889 (post-dated). It was reviewed at length in the *Daily News* on June 29th, in a leading article which had obviously been written by Andrew Lang. There is nothing in Lang's critique to suggest that there was any impropriety in Wilde's "ingenious hypothesis," which, the writer thinks, "may be agreeable to the House of Pembroke." He adds that people have only guessed all along at the identity of "Mr W H." and "that Mr Oscar Wilde's guess is perhaps quite as plausible." There was also a burlesque review in the *Saturday*, the bonhomie of which is indicated by its heading "Who's Hughes? or The Mystery of Mr H O." Elephantine banter!

Had there been any scandal caused by this publication it is probable that something would have been heard of it in the office in George Street, Edinburgh, whence *Maga* is issued. Such a clamour of objurgation would surely have resounded as far as there. Doubtless in deference to the raucous shouts of the incensed public, prompted if not by the Press (whose reception of the tale has been described), then by the untiring efforts of Wilde's innumerable enemies and their fierce hatred, the Messrs Blackwood might have seen fit to withdraw the magazine. But no! the Messrs Blackwood seem to have heard not a word of complaint or even expostulation about the publication of the "ingenious hypothesis." On this subject these gentlemen themselves may be considered authoritative. And here is what they wrote me on September 17th, 1929.

45 GEORGE STREET,

EDINBURGH

DEAR SIR,

There was no scandal attached to the publication of Mr. Oscar Wilde's story: "Portrait of Mr W H."

## HARRIS'S "MANY INVENTIONS"

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Mr Frank Harris is in error in the statement which you quote, and which you say refers to the above story. We believe that possibly he intended to refer to the story entitled "Dorian Gray," which we think appeared in *The Yellow Book*, but we do not know

Yours faithfully,

WM BLACKWOOD & SONS LTD.

The letter is signed by the firm itself

So much for the description by Harris of the "Mr W H" scandal!

In this description Harris's subconscious mental ego seems to me to have been under the influence of de Quincey's account of the horror and fury that obsessed London at the time of the Williams's wholesale slaughterings in "Murder as a Fine Art" It is the passage where de Quincey quotes Shelley Possibly Harris dimly "visualized" an essay on "Self-Murder as a Fine Art," with Wilde as its hero

He is equally quite inexact in his account of the public reception of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* I am aware that it is, or rather has been, on the British *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, ever since its author's disgrace and downfall, while *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and other books in which the authors seem to have inspected public lavatories for the enrichment of their vocabularies, are in high favour and in great demand; but at the time of its publication in *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, in June (for July), 1890, beyond fluttering one or two dovescotes in Fleet Street, its public ingestion was so reluctant a one that Wilde foolishly deemed it advisable (by then he had unfortunately jettisoned his dignified reticence in such matters) to stimulate the public appetite by writing answers to the papers

I have already pointed out, but will here repeat, that when Wilde received this commission from the editor of *Lippin-*

*cott's*, the £100 fee offered him for an approved manuscript of a novelette was so welcome a prospect that he made every effort to produce something that would satisfy the editor and earn the reward. He was with me in Paris when he had just received the commission and so I speak with authority. To suggest that, being actually in need of the money offered, he would deliberately write and send to the editor "a poisonous book," a pamphlet in propaganda of unnatural vices—writing as he had been asked to do for a public of moral austerity, of professing sabbatarianism—is to represent a shrewd and clever man as an utter fool. At that time the pallid spirochetes which finally killed him had not yet attacked his brain and he was still sane and level-headed. And that he had little interest in the story as a work of art is demonstrated by the fact that he was quite ready to "write in" six chapters of melodramatic extension, when it was pointed out to him by the English publishers that the story was too short for the British market, where a minimum of thousands of words of reading-matter was expected and demanded by the public in return for its money.

In those days he merely looked on *Dorian Gray* as a "pot-boiler." When the critics eventually denounced it as an immoral book, nobody was more indignant than its author. An austere editor had published it in a respectable magazine, a highly scrupulous and most businesslike firm of British publishers of sensational fiction, cookery-books and other domestic literature had issued it in book-form, where, *um Gottes Willen*, could anyone find anything objectionable in it? True, certain anonymous scribes had attacked it as immoral—possibly from envy and malice and quite possibly also to help its sale in a spirit of *camaraderie*. On the other hand, Walter Pater had publicly described it as "also a vivid, though carefully considered exposure of the corruption of a soul, with a very plain moral, pushed home, to the effect that vice and crime make people coarse and ugly." As a work of art—Oscar had

builded far better than he knew—it later won from so keen, puissant and scrupulous a critic as Octave Mirbeau, the man who proclaimed Maurice Maeterlinck to the world and sponsored *Marie Claire*—its letters patent of supremacy

Now Mirbeau personally detested Wilde. He had met him in Paris when success had turned his head and his hidden disease was attacking his brain, and he had scourged him pitilessly in his *Le Journal d'une Femme de Chambre*. Yet, as Lemonnier reminds us after Wilde's downfall, Mirbeau was one of the few Parisian writers who used his pen to protest against his sentence. He had just read *Dorian Gray* and wrote "I cannot think without a redoubling of indignation and revolt, that the perfect artist who wrote this book has been cut off from life and is undergoing hideous punishment for acts which concern one's disgust alone." Lemonnier adds "This article which appeared in *Le Journal* on July, 1895, made a great sensation in Paris and for some months *Le Journal* showed itself well disposed towards Oscar Wilde."

To me it has always seemed as intelligent to describe *Dorian Gray* as wilfully written to propagate moral leprosy, as it would be to accuse Æchines for allowing the public scribes in Athens to record for posterity his philippic *kata Timarchou*, or Sophocles for his *Œdipus Rex*. Wilde was no fool. He would know that a thousand books, however artistic, well written, insidious and powerful, would no more excite in normal men any feeling about *Dorian Gray*'s suggested perversity except one of disgust and repulsion, than a thousand grooms having led a horse to a tainted trough could force it to drink of its waters. And he knew that the percentage of men to whom such a book might appeal because they were of an unhappy, accursed congenitality is even in London so infinitely small—in spite of Harris's *dicta* on the subject—that only an idiot could look to them for the popular and financial success that he was so eagerly hoping for from this book.

Passing over several pages in which Harris gives a fair and accurate account of Wilde's relations with Beardsley, a just and honest description of his friendship with John Gray, and a striking anecdote of how Wilde's conversation at a luncheon party at Mr Ernest Beckett's house won over a crowd of hostile and recalcitrant fox-hunting Philistines to enthusiastic appreciation of his gifts, we come on page 137 to a very bad instance of his unscrupulous activity as a plagiarist. This time it is André Gide that he plunders. It is a doubly significant instance because in his letter to the *Mercure de France*, he has the impudence to accuse M. André Maurois of having stolen from his book the story of Narcissus and of having attempted to defend the theft by saying that he, Harris, had previously "lifted" the story from Gide's little book and to explain that Wilde had told him this story long before he met Gide and told it to him. Now this Narcissus story, as well as two other stories which Harris quotes from Wilde's mouth as having been told him at various times in their intercourse, are given in exactly the precise words recorded by Gide and translated by Harris.

The instance of page 137—a parable about Joseph of Arimathea—begins in Harris's *Life*.

When Joseph of Arimathea came down in the evening from Mount Calvary, where Jesus had died

This and every word following is an exact translation of Gide's text. This is how Gide had recorded Wilde's words to him.

Quand Joseph d'Arimathee, au soir, descendit  
When Joseph of Arimathea came down in the evening  
du mont de Calvaire où venait de mourir Jésus .  
from Mount Calvary, where Jesus had died

And here it becomes necessary to point out the curious rôle that Davray plays in masking his associate's dishonesty. If he had translated Harris right back into French without mani-

pulation, Harris's plagiarism from Gide, in the three instances referred to, would of course have been apparent to every French reader and critic. So here and in the two other instances where Harris quotes Wilde as telling him stories which he, Harris, has filched from Gide, Davray camouflages the theft by altering Harris's text, putting in a few clumsy words of his own concoction and, while spoiling Gide's story and his prose, making a direct accusation of plagiarism against Harris less easy to establish

Thus, in the above story about Joseph of Arimathea, in Davray's version as faked by the translator we read

Quand l'obscurité fut descendue sur la terre, Joseph d'Arimathée, ayant allumé une torche de bois de pin, descendit de la colline dans la vallée Car il avait à faire dans sa maison

There isn't a word of this in Harris's text, which is cribbed from André Gide word for word

Thirty or forty pages farther on, in an account of an imaginary lunch which he says he gave at the Savoy to Wilde and to which, he says, seven or eight of the twelve other men whom he had invited "to meet Mr Oscar Wilde and to hear a new story" refused to come, he again lifts, word for word, the story, which he puts into Oscar's mouth, from the pages of Gide Thus Harris

When Narcissus died the Flowers of the Field were plunged in grief and asked the River for drops of water that they might mourn for him

Thus Gide.

Quand Narcisse fut mort les fleurs des champs se désolèrent et demandèrent à la rivière des gouttes d'eau pour le pleurer

And thus Davray:

Quand Narcisse mourut, les Fleurs des champs furent navrées de chagrin, et demandèrent à la Source des gouttes d'eau pour le pleurer . . .



In this passage Davray improves on Gide, because it *was* in the pool of a spring—was it not?—and not in a river that Narcissus used to mirror himself. But this does not help to mask Harris's plagiarism

Traduttori. Traditori! and in Davray's case doubly so

The Narcissus story, by the way, told in the way Wilde would tell it, and allowing for one pause, takes exactly fifty-five seconds to deliver, so perhaps the "seven or eight" guests who refused to meet Wilde did not think the promised entertainment quite long and attractive enough. The story was suggested to Oscar by a favourite passage in Meredith's *Egoist*.

Does Harris really expect one to believe that Wilde, telling this story to Gide several years later, would use exactly the same words as he employed in telling it to the guests at the Savoy lunch? Davray did *not*, of course. He thought that "yarn a bit too thick" and altered Harris's version accordingly, and probably saved Harris by so doing from an unpleasant exposure in Paris

The Savoy lunch fabrication is a cruel one: the guests who refuse to meet the author of *A Woman of No Importance*; Harris's alarm at his appearance and manner, Harris's friendly hints to Wilde when "he took him aside and tried to warn him, and told him that unpleasant stories were being put about against him." This was in 1895 when Wilde's position was more secure than ever. Harris goes on to make Wilde say that such stories were all malice, and ask "What do I care? I go to Clumber this summer."

Wilde was not a liar. He was *not* going to Clumber that summer. He had fallen out with the Duke of Newcastle years before, and his visits to the Dukeries had ceased before 1890. I have this on the authority of the late Duke himself in one of the last letters he wrote before his fatal illness. It is dated May 2nd, 1928, from Forest Farm in Windsor Forest. I had been much incensed by the references of Thomas Cros-

land, Frank Harris and Bernard Shaw to Wilde's "snobbishness." During the seventeen years I knew Wilde and was often so much in his company I only once on a single occasion heard him make any statement which would even faintly justify one in suspecting him of that so very common English infirmity

On the contrary, he readily admitted that he had not the acquaintance of social celebrities when that was the case I once asked him if he knew the Prince, later King Edward VII He said "No, not at all," but added that he had once been in his company at a grand supper-party given by a Sir Charles Somebody He had been sitting close enough to the Prince to hear him say to his host, "Are you sure, Char-r-les, that you can affor-i-rd all this?" Now here is an incident from which Harris, his traducer, would at least have drawn a Contemporary Portrait, if not an anecdotal history of the whole House of Hanover Wilde never again referred to having met the Prince even that once

I have never even heard him boasting of friendship with men distinguished, not by high social rank, but by high literary achievement, such as Meredith, Pater and Swinburne, for whom he certainly expressed the greatest admiration, but nothing more I could not believe Harris's stories about his social jactitations I had never heard him allude to Clumber as having been a guest there In fact, the only occasion on which we ever spoke about this magnificent country house was once at a supper at the Garrick Club given to Lord Edward Cecil, at which the Duke was present, and when a forthcoming house-party at Clumber had been alluded to I casually said to Oscar as we were going home that I wondered who was going to Clumber for this house-party "Oh," he said, "the Duke will take a table of precedence and draw a line across it pretty high up, and those above the line will be invited, but not those below "

So when I read all this about his boasting of country houses and so on, on which the amiable trio referred to above based their wanton charge against him, I thought I would like a document—this book was already in preparation—from a first-class authority with which to confound them. I had some slight acquaintance with Newcastle and accordingly I wrote to ask him if it were true that he had ever entertained Oscar Wilde at Worksop. I had forgotten that they had quarrelled thirty-eight years previously. I received at once a courteous reply from his Grace (Oh, yes, I am a bit of a snob myself!) from which I will quote this one sentence only. "*It is, unfortunately, true that Oscar Wilde was an occasional visitor to Clumber in the late '80's*"

This established quite definitely in my mind the fact that Oscar Wilde did *not* tell Harris at a lunch at the Savoy in 1893 that he was going to visit the Duke that summer, any more than that he told him a story on the same occasion in *exactly* the same words in which he had told it to André Gide, and that therefore I was quite justified in stating that this lunch at the Savoy never took place at all. Still less so because pursuing his campaign of defamation Harris had previously told us that Oscar Wilde was a person to whose presence in their restaurant the Savoy management strongly objected, and consequently it is highly improbable that Harris would have fixed on that restaurant for the lunch in question.

But in the whole of this Chapter XI Harris seems to have been depending on his imagination and the writings of other people for the concoction of his narrative. Three or four pages before we come to the phantom banquet at the Savoy, we have him making Oscar tell him in detail that story of his about the blackmailers, which was dramatic, it is true, but most horribly suggestive and ill advised, and which I never listened to from Oscar's mouth without a shiver of apprehension. Wilde certainly told it in a dramatic way, comparing

the blackmailers coming out of the dark of Tite Street into the bright lights of his hall to panthers gliding through his doorway Harris omits this touch

His whole account of Oscar's recital of it is copied word for word from some report of the Queensberry trial, where he gave it in evidence, it was probably the report in the *Oscar Wilde Three Times Tried* book because I imagine that I used that when I was writing my *The Real Oscar Wilde*, and Harris actually reproduces my words there But of course here he adds to what Wilde did say a good deal that he, Harris, wished the public to believe he had said It was necessary for his purpose—that is, to bamboozle his public—that Wilde should be a self-confessed pervert, so he puts into his mouth on page 162 this "Of course, Frank,"—he is describing his conversation with Allen—"as I spoke my body seemed empty with fear I felt that there was nothing else for it but bluff" Then lower down "I went to the door with him and he walked away I closed the door but did not shut it at once, for suddenly I heard a policeman's step coming softly towards my house, pad, pad A terrible moment Then he passed by I went into the room again all shaken, wondering whether I had done right, whether Allen would hawk the letter about A thousand vague apprehensions Suddenly a knock at the street door My heart was in my mouth, still I went and opened it A man named Clibborn was there"

Of all the wicked, cruel and clumsy inventions !

Truly "a faithful chronicle!"

Truly Harris "could not have carried kindness further without sentimental folly," Mr George Bernard Shaw!

Harris explains that his great distress about Oscar was caused, not by that wretched story about the blackmailers, but by a mistrust of Oscar's fighting power—a mistrust, he says, which dated "from the second paper war with Whistler." This, we have seen, was closed by Whistler's second letter to

*Truth* on January 17th, 1890, which Oscar left unanswered, as there was really nothing to answer. Therefore this "mis-trust" and Harris's distress dated from more than three and a half years back, for the phantom lunch took place in 1893.

I cannot leave the Savoy restaurant without noting the fact that on most occasions when Harris entertained Oscar Wilde there, if other guests by the half-dozen refused to be present in the company of Wilde, a certain Roman emperor was never absent. This Roman emperor looked bloated, his face seemed to have lost its spiritual beauty and was oozing with material prosperity. He was always oozing whenever Harris refers to him. It was to be concluded that too much good living and too great success had affected him both morally and physically; in fact he exuded unctuous prosperity and reminded me of a Roman Emperor of the Decadence, Vitellius rather than Heliogabalus, whom I had met at a dinner in Tite Street at Christmas, 1894, and so described in two of my books. It was Mr. Oscar Wilde himself, as he had impressed me on that occasion, and Harris's frequent references to a Roman emperor of the Decadence are simply transferred from my books to his

## CHAPTER XI

### A POSTSCRIPT TO THACKERAY

SHAW and Harris, then, accuse Wilde of being a snob. Alfred Douglas did so, too, formerly, but he has since entirely withdrawn this and other charges against his friend. We can safely attribute this particular charge, as made in *Oscar Wilde and Myself*, to T. W. Crosland who, having often been compared to an inspired omnibus conductor, might without any misuse of words be spoken of himself as a "snob"—which used to be the generic name given to bus conductors in the early days of that mode of traffic.

Nobody was less a snob than Oscar Wilde. It was impossible for him to be one. A Fouquet may choose as his motto *Quo non ascendam*, Oscar Wilde, by his mental composition, his culture and, if you wish, his innate powers of earning fortunes and titles, had no higher heights to climb.

In the sarcastic chapter on "Literary Snobs," in his *Book of Snobs*, Thackeray sets down vulgarity, envy and assumption as the three constituent elements of snobbishness. Who could charge Wilde with vulgarity? Can a single vulgar word be found in any of his writings? Can a single person, of those who knew him in his life-time—Harold Nicolson and Vincent O'Sullivan not excluded—say that they ever heard a coarse word or faintest evil suggestion from his smiling lips? Even Harris admits this and helps himself to the very words with which I formulated this tribute.

So much for vulgarity. Then as to envy, does it need, at this time of day, any demonstration on my part to show that

envy was never for one moment allowed to sway his words and purposes?

\* Some people might see in some of the phrases about himself which Wilde uses in the letter he wrote to Douglas in prison, parts of which have been published as *De Profundis*, the "assumption" that Thackeray speaks of as the third constituent element. He speaks grandiloquently about his family and about himself. He describes himself as a "lord of language," as indeed he was. These people should be reminded that this was a private letter, originally intended for no other eyes than the person to whom it was addressed, with the one exception of the Governor of the prison who was to read it.

And how pathetically easy it is to understand how the wretched man, in his squalid prison cell, the pariah, the outcast, may have wished to remind the Governor who he was and what he had been! Possibly also he may have hoped that the warder who carried the writing from his cell to the Governor's office might have the curiosity to peruse it on his laggard way, and so learn a greater respect for C 33. For my part, I have always attributed this assumption to the disease which eventually killed him, the horrible disease in which megalomania is one of the symptoms that prove that the brain is attacked, and is the recognizable forerunner of the terrible and inevitable end that overhangs its victim. In his padded cell in Doctor Blanche's asylum, Guy de Maupassant, whose ruling passion had always been the acquisition of vast wealth, fancied himself a lord of millions of francs, Wilde in his squalid cell in Reading Gaol, a lord of language, for the cult of letters had always been the ruling passion of his life.

I have already given one striking proof that Wilde was not a snob—that is, in the matter of his alleged boast about his visit to Clumber. I could give many others. I will, however, confine myself to saying that the only pretext that Harris could adduce to palliate the injustice of this charge is Oscar's

undeniable love of pronouncing agreeably sounding names. Harris quotes a remark of his on this subject which is probably one of the very few real "confessions" in the book. ~~For the~~ rest, Harris had my *Unhappy Friendship* before him to refresh his memory as to this "confession," for on page 75 I find the following:

He spoke of his parents with high admiration, but I noticed with some misgiving that, with reference to his father, he seemed to have the middle-class contempt for the title of knighthood. He would refer to it apologetically, yet for more sonorous prefixes he had a certain admiration. He introduced me at various times to noblemen, and each time I noticed with what pleasure he pronounced their names.

But I am afraid that most of us are like that, and that most of us would take more pleasure in referring to our acquaintance with Viscount Ickornshaw, for instance, than to, say, Viscount Jones, irrespective of their qualities and achievements.

We all have our little weaknesses in this respect—especially in England—and I feel quite sure that if on the eve of the battle of Agincourt it had been one of Viscount Jones's ancestors whom he had overheard wishing for more men from England, instead of "my cousin Westmoreland," King Henry V would never have risen to the lyric heights that have so endeared to us the tirade to which he then and there gave utterance. For one thing, the second line would not have scanned. It is true he could have met the rules of scansion "half-way in the matter" by addressing Jones by his title thus

"What's he that wishes so?

My cousin (Viscount) Jones?—No, my fair cousin——"

Yet Jones might have been, as a fighter, a whale and a wow; and Westmoreland a flop and a fizzle.

But in the way of sonority Westmoreland delivered the goods.

People might accuse Shaw of being a snob because of his frequent references to the magnitude of his earning powers;



as where he tells the world he could any day earn with his pen just one thousand times as much as John Milton for as much reading-matter as goes into *Paradise Lost*; as where he tells Harris he could pull down fifty thousand iron men at the mere raising of his finger if he consented to lend his name to a film on Oscar Jactitation about one's money and earnings . . . eh? But everybody knows that Shaw cares nothing for money, has neither joy of, nor pride in it beyond as a tangible proof of the world's appreciation of his works One sometimes visualizes him as spending much of his time, armed with a besom—like Mrs Partington on the shores of the Atlantic—trying to repel from the front door of his “elegant and commodious flat” in Whitehall Court the swirling, gold-spangled waters of an inrushing and constant Pactolus

With Harris it is, I am afraid, as the French say *une autre paire de manches* Here one might adduce a *tu quoque* argument, if *quoque* were an adverb at all applicable He is constantly boasting of his acquaintances and friendships with the great Douglas has over and over again exposed his fictions in so doing It is a kind of snobbishness which, however, is eminently excusable and indeed, as betokening admiration of, and allegiance to, men who have done great and good things, praiseworthy, but he exposes himself to censure when he charges his friend unjustly with his own venial weakness So let it be said that when, comparing them with Wilde, he writes towards the end of Volume II that of all the great men he has met and loved he would rather summon back Wilde, “to spend an evening with him”—Oh, Anti-climactic Harris!—than Renan, or Carlyle, or Verlaine, or Dick Burton, or Davidson, anyone who knew Renan, or Verlaine, or John Davidson intimately, or had “heard on” Dick Burton very much in detail and could fancy Carlyle, is inclined to shrug his shoulders with contemptuous indignation, till a mental picture arising of the bland, reticent and discriminating Renan

gazing in wild surmise at the exuberant Frank Harris vociferating in his bookish fane in the École de France, or of the sanctum of the testy sage of Chelsea being invaded by the ex-journalist from Chicago (who had seen him for half an hour in 1877), and of Carlyle, remembering Luther at the Wartburg, seizing upon his heavy ink-bottle to repel the noisy and boisterous invader, one bursts into a laugh and passes on

With regard to Lord Alfred Douglas, it is again *une autre paire de manches* and a very different pair too. It is quite possible that he used to be rather fond of his courtesy title and I can readily understand it, this little satisfaction being about the only one of which a stepmotherly destiny had been unable to deprive him. But this was in the day when people on every side were trying to shout him down. To-day there is not in England a more modest man, and to-day he has reached a position in English literature of which any man might be proud, and which would excuse a very considerable amount of what Thackeray calls assumption. Publishers eagerly bid for his writings. Recently one firm was glad to purchase the right of republication of his poems, and to pay him a substantial sum on account of royalties on the sales of these poems.

I attended the trial at the Old Bailey where the King, on the prosecution of Robert Baldwin Ross, had arraigned Alfred Bruce Douglas for criminal libel against the former. I was there under rather peculiar circumstances, which accounted for Bosie's look of amused surprise when he saw me entering the court behind the Judge, and taking my seat in great state in the pew designated "City Lands." I could not help thinking that where the City usually "lands" its clients for the Old Bailey is in the "black dock's awful pen," where the young aristocrat was then looking very much like Goetz von Berlichingen (he of the Iron Hand) may have looked when he was told to seat himself at his trial on the Armsunders-Bank.

Next to me was sitting another member of the Douglas family, Sholto, the artist, who painted the distinguished portrait of Bosie's mother, the late Marchioness of Queensberry, which hangs in the dining-room of his flat at Hove. Sholto did not seem at all concerned as to the possible fate of his kinsman, and said something to the effect that Bosie was always getting into messes but was wonderfully clever at fighting his way out of them.

How I came to be in the Old Bailey under very different conditions from those predicted for me by monitory well-wishers arose from the fact that one day, in scanning the collection of books in the library at Guilsborough Hall, I had noticed two little volumes with some such title as *Omnium Gatherum*. I saw, written on the fly-leaf, "John Duke Coleridge, Eton College, 1834." It occurred to me that these must have been the property of the late Lord Chief Justice and that probably his son might like to possess them, and on the principle that it is always good to stand well with His Majesty's judges, with an eye on any possible mitigation of sentence, I sent the books to his Lordship and asked him kindly to accept them if he attached any sentimental value to them. They were two little volumes published anonymously but, as Lord Coleridge told me in his letter when accepting the offering, they were a compilation of anecdotes and so forth by the unfortunate poet Southey, part of the hack-work which in the end reduced his fine brain to hopeless idiocy.

When I saw that the Ross-Douglas trial was to come on, and that Lord Coleridge was to preside at the Old Bailey, I thought I would like a *quo*, not for my *quid*, but for the shilling or two at which the secondhand bookseller had marked these two little bound volumes. The Judge wrote me that if I would present myself on the morning of the trial at the Judge's entrance at the Old Bailey, his clerk would have great pleasure in seeing that I was properly seated.

It was during this trial that the presiding judge applied to Lord Alfred, in connection with some disparaging allusion of the "prisoner's" to somebody in the retail branch of the distributing industry, the same designation as has with equal injustice been so frequently applied to Oscar Wilde. I say "with injustice" because Lord Coleridge seemed to have forgotten that Alfred Douglas was born and had been brought up in a class where ineradicable prejudices did—and possibly still do—exist. It is needless to detail them. They are born in the blood and bred in the bone and they last out a man's lifetime, however foolish and out-of-date he comes to know them to be. I remember during the war that an old lady of this class whom I met at a country house in Galway said to me, about someone in the neighbourhood, that she was very sorry about it and that doubtless it was very snobbish of her, but that she could never bring herself to consider anybody who was a Dissenter as well, you know. . . how shall I say? You will understand.

Nobody would, I suppose, ever call Wordsworth a snob for voicing a preference for swords over ledgers. Public schoolboys all over England are brought up to the idea that they possess a vast social superiority over the children born to residents in the town. Some Oxford men persist in fancying themselves socially much superior to their fellow collegians at Cambridge—a prejudice that no doubt dates back to the time of the Civil War when Oxford took the side of the gentlemanly Cavaliers against the plebeian Roundheads. And so on. But I think that Harris, in trying to ridicule Bosie on the subject of assuming social superiority (which he has never done) must have been listening to some lies from Robert Ross, who seems to have lied about the same matter to Oscar.

Davray publishes a letter from Wilde to Ross, dated July 20th, 1897, in which he tells Ross he has pointed out to Bosie that it is "outrageously stupid on his part to pose as your social

superior because he is the third son of a Scotch marquess, and you the third son of a commoner" Wilde rather clumsily adds "Quand on est gentilhomme, on est gentilhomme." This is stupid because in French the word "gentilhomme" only applies to a nobleman, which Ross certainly was not. He goes on to say that "there is no difference between gentlemen," and concludes by telling Ross to let Bosie know, when he next writes to him, "that you are not going to stand any of his boasting of social superiority to yourself and that, if he can't understand that gentlemen are gentlemen and nothing else, you do not desire ever to hear him spoken of again"

It is, of course, obvious that Douglas had never made any such boast, and equally obvious that Ross who was wildly jealous of Bosie's looks, rank and intellectual superiority to him, as well as Oscar's immense preference for Bosie, had deliberately lied to Oscar. Possibly a glimpse of the letters that Oscar was at that time writing to his friend may have inflamed his jealousy to fever pitch. It is also quite possible, of course, that Oscar never wrote the letter at all. I do not think he would have written "Quand on est gentilhomme, on est gentilhomme," and if any original exists of the letter published by Davray I have not seen it.

Wilde was, of course, here the correct interpreter of the social code, which establishes that all gentlemen are equals in rank. He seems to have expounded this at great length to the young *cadet de famille*, who certainly did not require any such instruction. It was as much inbred in him as his possible misesteem for retail traders from a social point of view. If Wilde had been under the impression that Bosie needed any such instruction he might have done better to send him a marked copy of *Harriette Wilson's Memoirs*, drawing his attention to the passage which records a conversation between Harriette and a gentleman still higher in the Scotch peerage.

than the Marquess of Queensberry, namely the Duke of Argyll, head of the House of Campbell.

Harriette tells the Duke, who has been trying to flirt with her, that she wants to talk of something else and so goes on to say: "Mr Colman accuses you of having cut him dead in the Park yesterday, when he bowed to you"—"What a vulgar fellow!" cried Argyll. "Why vulgar?" asks Harriette. Then the Duke expounds to Harriette the clause in the social code which Wilde had tried to impress on Bosie. This is how Argyll puts it

It is a vulgar idea, and one which certainly never occurred to me; not because I happen to be Duke of Argyll, for a private gentleman's rank in society is the same as mine, therefore, what right have I to cut him? Or what right would any duke have to cut a private gentleman? Tell Mr Colman he is an ass, my pretty dear

A hurried bundling-back of the volume with a large note of interrogation in red ink on the wrapper would probably have been Bosie's riposte to such an *envoi*. But the thing could never have happened, for nobody better than Wilde knew that nobody less than Lord Alfred Douglas needed any such reminder

I will add that the more I think of it the more I am convinced, after reading a letter to Douglas which Wilde wrote on the date attributed to the letter to Ross on Douglas's "assumption," that this letter published by Davray is a forgery and doubtless that Ross was the forger. For one thing, Wilde hardly if ever dated his letters and the letter in question is fully dated. Again, is it likely that having at that time not more than half a dozen friends in the world Oscar would try to sow dissension between the two warmest of these?

It has been clumsily maintained that the best proof that Oscar Wilde was a snob was his evident delight in always being seen in the company of the third son of the holder of one of the finest Scottish titles, a youth who was a true representative

of the class in whose veins the *sang azur* flows. This aspersion only shows the ignorance of these malevolent commentators about elementary human psychology. The snob of the particular class in which, by reason of his other qualities, Wilde perforce would have to be ranked, is the last person in the world who would be content to play in public a secondary rôle, with the general attention diverted from him to his companion, on whom all the limelight would be shed. About whom was it said that he wanted no rival near his throne? The *hoi polloi* being totally unaware of the axiom laid down above by the Duke of Argyll would pay all the deference to the "mylord" and little or none to the lord of language. In this case, of course, the lord of language being very fond of his companion would delight in the deference shown to him even to his own obliteration. But given he were a man of the calibre of a Robert Baldwin Ross, gauge what envy, hatred and malice this would infuse into his heart and what steps he might eventually take to soothe his wounded vanity and take reprisal for their infliction. Ah! no doubt at all that Ross lied to Oscar and equally no doubt that the latter never wrote the letter in *La Tragédie Finale*.

Perhaps the best proof I can give how untrue is the accusation that Oscar Wilde liked to boast about his friendship with Alfred Douglas is the fact that, during the two or three years which elapsed between the time when he made Douglas's acquaintance and the occasion on which I met the two together, although I had had many letters from Wilde during that period he had never once even mentioned Lord Alfred's name, so that I did not know that they were acquainted. He may have been fond of titles, but he certainly never boasted about them. I had to get him to take out the "Lord Anthony Sherard" from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* because there was an estimable Baron Sherard then in being. However, Oscar did not let me escape completely but reduced me to the rank

of a baronet, as which I now figure in the novel as having sold my soul for a great pearl or something of the kind

In the whole course of my friendship with Wilde and Douglas, I only once saw the two together. This was upstairs at the Café Royal one early afternoon after lunch. They were sitting together, probably at the same table by the window at which Wilde sat on a memorable occasion with Lord Queensberry and his third son. There was absolutely nothing in the aspect of the two convives to warrant any comment on the nature of their friendship, and nobody was more indignantly amazed than I when I read in the notorious letter (given *in extenso*, of course, by Harris) the manner in which Lord Queensberry described his impression of their demeanour towards each other on the occasion referred to above, because obviously when I joined them at their table they would not have been on guard against any misinterpretation, whilst when the surmising sire was their guest they would undoubtedly have zealously minded their P's and Q's, especially their Q's. To me they only looked like two gentlemen who had lunched pleasantly and were loitering over their coffee. They looked like two men who thoroughly enjoyed each other's company and who were truly happy to be together. Douglas struck me as a trim, athletic young fellow and I remember thinking what a splendid rider to hounds he would make. I did not think the same of Oscar, though as a matter of fact he was just then going *ventre à terre* in that direction. Even then I could understand the extreme attraction that the youth must exercise over him. Since then, I have understood it even better. And in this appreciation Bosie's good looks entered for nothing. I hardly noticed them at the time. What I did notice was his perfect manners, his entire absence of "side," the ready wit with which he "came back" to each of Oscar's sallies, and the kind of perfect harmony that seemed to exist between the youth and the older man. They seemed



just made to be friends. Since then I have come better to understand Oscar's extreme affection for Alfred Douglas. I have had the privilege of studying his character at close quarters and of observing those qualities which even if they were undeveloped in those early days when he first became friends with Oscar would be clearly discerned by the man who, all-seeing philosopher that he was, had the shrewdest knowledge of men. Douglas was perhaps the only living being whom Oscar Wilde, conscious of his own immense superiority, considered worthy to be raised to the position of a life-long friend. He doubtless foresaw in Douglas the poet he has since become. He would recognize in him a brother-enthusiast in the cult of literature. He would admire his clan-spirit, his devotion to his mother and brothers, his inherited pugnacity which fights to a finish, his Douglas *bravoure*, his sense of humour and perhaps more than all else, hater as he was of all sentimentality, his real goodness of heart. He would love his smile.

These lines may make Douglas's enemies and calumniators sneer and shrug their shoulders, but they are written down as the exact truth as I see it. A year or two ago I too might have sneered and shrugged. Douglas is certainly a fighter to the finish, a descendant of the *dhu glas*, who founded the family. But once he has got his foe down and at his mercy, this mercy is not refused. A good instance of this is how he allowed Ross to withdraw from the prosecution with a *nolle prosequi* which certainly saved the prosecutor from the Old Bailey dock. To-day he says that his motive was only to save his pocket, but I fancy it was a nobler one than that, he did not wish to smash the "mirror of perfect friendship" into smithereens. When he talks of the matter his chief concern—showing the lover of letters—is with the fine archaic language in which the lawyers couched the plea of justification which he filed as his defence against Ross's charge of criminal libel, quoting it with a roll and a relish.

He is thoroughly good-hearted, though he would be the last person to admit a quality which his peculiarly sweet smile betrays when it lights up a face which shows all that he has gone through in the sixty-six years of his life. He is very fond of children and these love him. He may often be seen surrounded by them in the gardens of St Ann's Well, which are opposite his house in Hove. One day recently I found him in sincere distress at home. He had that morning received from some town in Australia a letter from the house-keeper of a beautiful girl who for months past had been writing letters of passionate admiration to him, declaring that she had fallen hopelessly in love with his "lovely poems and his still more lovely face." He had written to tell her that he looked very different now from any portrait of him she might have seen, and did his best to discourage her ardent suit, but as she persisted in her letters of adoration he left the last three or four of them unanswered. The result was that she committed suicide, and the news of this had profoundly distressed him. I think it was the same day that I saw another proof of his kindness of heart and sincere delight in the service of letters. There were lying on his table three rather bulky numbers of a review which contained nothing but amateur poems. The editor had sent him these, as a poet of great distinction, to solicit his judgment as to which could be considered the best of these poems and worthy of the prize which he had offered for competition. And Douglas, whose sight has recently been imperilled by the destruction of his right eye, cheerfully and readily had accepted from a man he hardly knew and because it was in the service of the Muses a tedious eye-straining task which took him several hours, but for the fatigue and danger of which he described himself as largely rewarded by finding in these scores of sets of verses one real poem—one about the grave of Edgar Allan Poe—which had greatly pleased him and to which he had awarded the laurel.

wreath or golden rose or whatever it was I thought that in this he had shown even better than Shaw reading the 150,000 words of Harris's flatulent prose in many fewer hours, with two serviceable eyes, for a cap of shame to be thrust on an illustrious though lifeless head

Douglas's sense of humour must have delighted Wilde as I know it has often delighted me Many things in Shakespeare appeal in particular to him and light up his face with merriment Falstaff and his interlocutors are an especial joy to him and I remember how he chuckled over Falstaff's answer to Justice Shallow's question about Jane Nightwork "Doth she hold her own well?" and Falstaff answers "Old, old, Master Shallow" On which the justice comments "Nay, she must be old, she cannot choose but be old, it's certain she's old" This "she cannot choose but be old" tickles Douglas immensely, and it is a pleasure to watch his enjoyment of words which lie too deep for tears Another writer who gives him great delight in his appeal to his sense of humour is George Bernard Shaw, and he often quotes a letter from Shaw, written on July 4th, 1931, in reply to one from Douglas complaining of the attack on him in Shaw's 20,000-word eulogy of Harris's vile book about Oscar Shaw wrote "Why has Heaven afflicted me with this infantile complex of yours which keeps you 'making a low-spirited noise,' like Mrs MacStinger's baby, down the ages because somebody has been unkind to you?" In the same letter Shaw withdraws everything he had written against Douglas in the letter which Harris so skilfully used in merchandising his farrago of fake, but I have yet to see the passages which have done and are doing Bosie such incalculable harm all over the world removed from the appendix

In the meanwhile Shaw's "low-spirited noise like Mrs. MacStinger's baby" gives Douglas great delight He quoted it to me when I asked him why so many of his poems were in

so poignantly sad a note, and he said that he could only write when he felt like that

Douglas is by no means the moody, irascible, revengeful person that many fancy him. He has joy in what appeals to his humour and the least little sign that grudging Fortune may show of relenting towards him she has so scurvily entreated brings joy to his face, differing, however, from the real happiness that some literary delight may give to his expression. Douglas quoting Shaw or Shakespeare, and Douglas reading in an evening paper that he has brought off a "double" at Lingfield both present pictures of a happy man, but it is on the lineaments and in the smile of the former that the really happy man shows himself. He has a real cult of letters and finds no labour too great in the observance of its rites. I never knew a man more punctilious in verifying his references. That "of course she is old," for instance. He spent over a quarter of an hour in my presence hunting up the scene in the Shakespeare in his study, because he wanted the *ipsissima verba* of the dialogue. Was it in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*? No, surely it was somewhere in the 2nd part of *Henry IV*! Mr Justice Horridge was quite justified when he praised the plaintiff's sense of responsibility in matters literary, and impressed upon the jury that it was no Fleet Street flibbertigibbet but a serious and important man of letters and editor that asked them to vindicate his name and honour.

Is it not demonstrable that between people who are innately sympathetic to each other there is telepathic communication? If so, this sympathy must exist between me and Alfred Douglas. I can give a remarkable illustration of this by an occurrence that took place in July of this year, 1936. We were talking about birthdays, and having mentioned that his birthday came in the same month as that of Oscar Wilde, in October, he asked me what was the date of my birthday. I said December, and I was just going to add "the third" when it suddenly came

into my mind that that was the date on which Catilina's conspiracy in Rome was discovered, and Cicero was supplied with the material for one of his finest philippics. Having something of the prig in my disposition, I might have inflicted various synchronous details on my interlocutor, when he made a move for the door with a "I want to get an evening paper at once." So we both went out together. I was still musing on the evading and erupting insurgent with the silver eagle, when Douglas emerging from the newspaper-shop brandished a *Star* aloft, calling across the road, "It's all right, he's done it. I've got a double." It appeared that he had backed two horses, at Lingfield, I think, and the horse whose win had given him the double was one called CATILINA. We had both been thinking of this name at the same moment.

I now perfectly understand Oscar Wilde's admiration for Alfred Douglas, and even if I had known then that it was love that drew them together I should have derived from that knowledge no feeling of reprobation for their friendship, still less so that at school in my boyhood I had gone through more than one experience of the affection surpassing the love of women for school-mates of mine. There was a Rossetti from Roumania and a Dreyfus from Strasbourg for whom I would gladly have laid down my life, and whatever the unpleasant biological explanation of these feelings may have been, I know that I considered our friendships beautiful and romantic and altogether blameless.

With regard to Oscar's "love letters" of which so much was made, I saw nothing in them to modify my opinion of the nature of his relations with Bosie Douglas. These letters are really not a shade more impassioned—if considerably better written and more poetical—than the letters which King James I wrote to "Steenie." Yet nobody has ever proved that there was anything wrong in this affection, though I believe that a Mrs. Hutchinson—no doubt to curry favour with the Puritans

—did make charges which were never established and are indeed, on the contrary, disproved by King James's keen interest in and solicitude about George Villiers's marriage and, further, by the warm affection shown by the rigid Charles for Steenie's fatherless baby, the second Duke of Buckingham.

In which connection it has often occurred to me to see in Alfred Bruce Douglas one of the salient features in the character of James's second son, afterwards King James II, and that is the bravery that never admits defeat. Of the man who was vanquished at the Battle of Boyne and whose "nobler parts" now lie interred in the chapel of the church at St Germain-en-Laye, Turenne wrote that he was the bravest man he had ever known, an opinion also held and made public by the Great Condé. This quality in James proceeded doubtless from the same Scottish pugnacity which makes Douglas such a "handful" to tackle. A review of his career and innumerable encounters makes me think of one of those upright punching-balls which boxers use in training, when a partner is not available, and are imbedded on a metal rod of such great resiliency and springiness that the harder the blow delivered against the ball, the more violent is the rebound—it is this spirit that Kipling admired in *If*. I felt the aptness of this comparison more strongly than ever when I had occasion recently to observe with what serene indifference and courage Oscar's friend had accepted and reacted against one of the most cruel blows which a pitiless and pursuing fate has delivered upon him—the total loss of his right eye. It is true that this appalling accident has disfigured him little if at all—I had not noticed it until he began to chat about it—but how many men, who had been famed for personal beauty and not unnaturally proud of it, would speak of it without anguish and indignation against the unskilful practitioner who was held responsible for this real catastrophe by the courts. But never Bosie. In his fight with fate he gives and takes her blows—

even her Jarnac thrusts—with the indifference with which the *dhu glas* took what was coming to him and was expected by him at the battle of Chevy Chase. He even speaks of it with merriment, for though he was heavily out of pocket over his costs in the action for damages against the man who had partially blinded him and, by filing his petition after the verdict, avoided all financial loss for damages and costs to the plaintiff, it strongly appeals to his sense of humour that the miserable sum of £400 awarded him by the Sheriff's Court to which, the defendant having made default at the High Court, the case was remitted for assessment of damages, is the largest amount that has ever been granted by this court. The anticlimax of the dénouement of his real tragedy amuses him, although its victim, and lights up his face with a smile.

All this, friend Zoilus, to show that there were all kinds of reasons why Oscar Wilde should delight in the company of Alfred Douglas, and be proud to be seen everywhere with him, and that this delight and this pride prove that he, Oscar, would never have been selected by Thackeray as a target.

As Douglas points out in his preface he and I have been estranged for a very long time—for over thirty years indeed. We have scattered over each other on many occasions in the Press what Charles Dickens, alluding to some vituperations of Mrs Gamp, called "flowers of eloquence." I can't say I ever bore him any grudge for this. I had never believed one-tenth of what Robert Ross had suggested about him, because instinct had warned me that Ross was not a man blindly to be trusted. It was not, however, until much later that I had proof that his word was not to be trusted at all. One instance of such proof was when after Oscar's death I inquired of him what had become of the pawn-ticket for the Berkeley Gold Medal, of which Oscar was so proud that he had preserved and renewed the pawnbroker's voucher for it through all the years of his forlorn makeshifts in Paris. I had thought it ought to

be rescued and preserved for his family. Ross admitted having found the ticket amongst the papers Oscar had left in his room at the Hôtel d'Alsace and added that he had destroyed it. "How could I renew the ticket?" asked he. "Why! There was £80 worth of gold in the medal" Though it struck me at the time what a huge amount of matter (in the shape of gold ingots) the bishop who denied the existence of matter must have produced to secure a yearly income of over £80 to establish his endowment, it was not till later that I learned from the goldsmiths in Sackville Street, Dublin, that the whole sum given by the bishop was under £200, and that the cost of the particular medal of which Oscar Wilde had been so proud and his winning of which had so delighted Speranza, figured on their books at less than a fiver. The truth was not in Ross, and sordid self-interest seems to have been the leit-motif of his life. When he was rummaging in the "tumble of papers" that poor Oscar left behind him, the pawnbroker's voucher, doubtless for a loan not exceeding 50 francs, did not seem worth preserving. *Au feu, donc!* But all these letters from Alfred Douglas? Ah! here were papers worth keeping for future use and profit perhaps. And so carefully kept they were and skilfully used, even the "Charlie" letter, a most harmless epistle which could, however, be most malignantly interpreted. It was afterwards sold by Ross to Frank Harris to be used against Douglas, and neither Ross nor Harris, who were both supposed to be my friends, were restrained in this sordid transaction by the fact that my name being used in it might equally compromise and injure me.

Crosland in the book he penned under the title *Oscar Wilde and Myself*, which was issued by John Long as by Bosie who has since repudiated it almost *in toto*, refers in the index to a passage in my *Life of Wilde*, as showing "Sherard's views on Wilde's vices." This passage was a quotation from Weininger's book, which ran as follows. "Physiologists have



noted that where a child is born to a couple in which the woman has a much stronger nature and a great mental superiority over the father, the chances are that the child will develop at certain physical periods in his career an extraordinary attraction towards persons of his own sex "

This was quoted rather as an explanation of strange, seemingly abnormal friendships and not at all as my views of anybody's vices; and I remember thinking at the time when I read *Weininger* how truly it indicated the real cause of the friendship of King James for George Villiers, and how the king's parentage (the brilliant Mary Queen of Scots and the obtuse Darnley) bore out this theory

Ross, who had at that time the "Charlie" letter, so easily construable to my discredit, waiting for fructuous disposal in his unlovely archives and who must have been well aware of my views on "Wilde's vices" from listening to my denunciations of the whole beastly business as we travelled down to Reading on more than one occasion, to visit the prisoner, and may well, as I now surmise, have longed therefore to knock me on the head and to bundle me out of the railway carriage, actually, repeatedly urged me to take action for libel against the publisher and author of *Oscar Wilde and Myself*, but, of course, I never had the faintest thought to do so I remember writing to Ross that even if Douglas and I were not friends, I could not forget his real devotion to Oscar, and that a still more cogent reason for doing nothing to try and injure him was that I had always entertained a high admiration and might I say affection for his brother, Percy (the 9th Marquess of Queensberry), who so befriended Wilde in his direst need and who, I knew, was devotedly attached to his brother Alfred, and that I had determined never to do anything, even since his lamented death, that would have wounded his noble heart Possibly I also remembered that my mother's mother's people, the Curwens of Workington, had had century-long relations

of peace and war with the Douglasses on the yonside of the Border and recalled noting in the will of Sir Thomas Curwen, who was the school-fellow and friend of Henry VIII, that special mention was made of a bequest to "my brother John's wife, a ring with a red stone in it, that was the Lord Drumlangrigs" [*sic*]

No, I never contemplated any action against the brother of Percy Douglas. How could I ever forget how out of love for this brother he had risked the whole of his capital available at the time to find the largest part of the £2,500 which had to be put up in cash before Oscar, after his first abortive trial, could be released from Holloway. The judge had fixed the bail at £5,000, of which £2,500 in Oscar's own recognizances and the other half to be found by two sureties, each in £1,250. Percy Douglas produced £1,800, which represented almost all he possessed at that time. Of this sum £1,250 went for his own liability as bailsman, and the balance of £550 to make up the bail tendered by the Rev. Stewart Headlam who did not possess a "tossler" of his own. The balance of £700 was supplied to Headlam by a Jewish gentleman, Ernest Levenson, husband of Ada Levenson, the "Sphinx" of *Punch* who lived in Courtfield Gardens, S.W., where they hospitably entertained Oscar Wilde as their guest, after his release, for a few days after his first night at his brother Willy's house in Oakley Street, whither he had returned some days before I came over from Paris to him. Ada Levenson some years ago published, with numerous of Oscar's letters to her, an obviously fanciful account of Oscar's stay in her house, an interesting brochure which, however, soon found its way into the "remaindered" bookstalls where I procured my copy.

Some of Ada Levenson's anecdotes about her illustrious guest, showing that his sufferings in prison and the degradation of the dock had left no trace of embitterment in that serene and lofty soul that was his, are striking, while Oscar's

letters to her are as beautiful as most letters he wrote to people who were dear to him. Her book is indispensable to future biographers. But she might have spared us the passage in which she relates that, having decided with Ernest to invite Oscar to stay at their house while he was out on bail, she next called the servants together and, informing them of the guest she was about to receive, gave anyone who might object to wait upon a man who came to them from Holloway Gaol full permission to resign at once without causing thereby any resentment on her part. Naturally none of the servants exercised this privilege of demanding congé without causing displeasure. All servants worshipped Oscar Wilde. Instances of this have been given. Is it not on record that after the 1895 catastrophe his man committed suicide? Men who are respected and loved by servants in England are never of the genus whom Thackeray pilloried in his book, for no class better than the domestic staff folk know the true gentleman from the other kind, no matter how rich and publicly courted he may be. "Jeames" is the true appraiser of social values. He has the sharpest nose for the parvenu and pretender. It required the malice of a Harris and of a Crosland, and the hasty misconception of character of a man who had only met Wilde three or four times in the whole course of his life to brand this affable and courteous gentleman, this *leutseliger Herr*, this all-knowing scholar, this man of prodigious intellect, as a social climber and a snob because he loved the company of a young aristocrat and was proud to be seen with him in public. Oscar Wilde loved to be with his friend, not because he was Lord Alfred Douglas, but because he was Alfred Douglas.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE MEANDERINGS OF MÜNCHAUSEN

HARRIS, throughout his book, is, of course, hideously unjust to Lord Alfred Douglas. By the time he started on this "faithful chronicle" and during the years before it appeared in print, the Douglas of Wilde's day had shown the will and the power entirely to transform himself, and it was as unfair to write of him without the slightest reference to this entire transformation as it would have been—O, Shakespearian Harris!—to hand down to posterity, as a description of the Henry of Agincourt, the roistering boon companion of Doll Tearsheet and Sir John Falstaff.

And there were besides all sorts of other considerations which ought to have stayed his pen. Douglas was married and had a son, his brother, who had been so good to Harris's "dear friend," and to Harris himself to the extent of £2,000, was now the guardian of the name and honour of the great family which he, Harris, was so blithely besmirching, and there was living, in serene dignity, "the charming, cultivated woman, with exquisite taste in literature and art—a woman of the most delicate, aspen-like sensibilities and noble generousities," as he wrote himself, whom deliberately to wound. . . but what's the use of supposing that any such scruples ever entered the mind of Frank Harris?

His charges against Douglas are that as a beautiful, effeminate lad he debauched Wilde, and that this evil intimacy was renewed after he rejoined him in Naples. It is further insisted upon by Harris that it was Douglas who by incessant entreaties and

the strongest pressure induced the reluctant Wilde to break all the good resolutions with which he came out of prison, abandon the plan of resuming a sober and decent life with Constance Wilde and his children, and come back to live with him in defiance of the world's opinion and the precepts of morality. This is as absolutely contrary to the facts and the truth as it is possible for anything to be

Douglas freely admits that his affection for his friend was so strong that nobody more than he desired to live once more in Wilde's company, but it was Wilde and not Douglas who solicited the reunion. No stronger appeals to the friend's affection, sympathy and pity could be found than the letters which Oscar was addressing daily, or even twice daily, to his absent friend. These letters have since been published in New York. In the last one, written towards the end of June, 1897, he addresses an irresistible appeal to Douglas as his source of inspiration, and tells him that he feels that away from his company he will never again be able to produce any writings of any artistic value whatever.

Wilde carefully concealed his true longing for the presence of Bosie from everybody who went to Berneval, and I came away from my visit to him under the impression that Douglas was importuning him with requests which he was most reluctant to grant. Since I have read the letters in the wonderful facsimile copy that was produced in New York without Bosie's permission and against his wish, I have asked myself what man living could have resisted such moving appeals to affection and comradeship.

As a matter of fact, as Douglas points out, it was during this period after the reunion of the two friends (Harris has absolutely no right to describe their relationship at Naples as anything but a strong friendship) that Oscar produced his *Ballad of Reading Gaol*, the finest as it was definitely the last of his works as a poet.

With regard to the second charge, which he repeats in the "introductory essay" written for the New York Modern Library edition of *De Profundis*, in these terms:

... he lives at his lover's expense for years, wastes his hard-earned thousands and when he comes into his fortune doles him out a few hundreds ("four hundred," he says) with insults and gibes,

Douglas quotes this attack on him to show his contempt for it. In his place, as regards the "hard-earned thousands," I would have referred Harris to his own book and the passages where he describes the "fatal facility" with which Oscar produced the plays that so enriched him, and perhaps, after pointing out how he contradicts himself, have reminded him of the French military saying *Ce qui vient par la flûte s'en va par le tambour*, meaning that money so easily earned seemed to me not the sort of money that it was a sin to waste.

I think Douglas must have smiled over the "hard-earned thousands" when he thought of the ease with which his brilliant friend produced work for which rigid, even parsimonious business men were so anxious to pay any price that they would have granted any request for money, even in advance, if he had so desired.

Douglas has told me of a strange incident at the hotel in Worthing where Oscar was writing *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which shows, amongst other things, how Oscar also had only to "lift his little finger" to bring down on his writing-table a torrential shower of gold. He had come down from town, and in the room in Oscar's suite where he worked there was lying on the mantelpiece a letter, the postmark of which showed that it had been delivered several days previously.

"Why don't you open this letter?" asked Douglas.

"Leave that letter alone," cried Oscar. "If you touch it I'll never speak to you again." I wrote several days ago to

George Alexander telling him I needed £300 and asking him to advance it to me, and of course that letter is from him and contains a refusal. I'm not going to open it "

Douglas tore it open in spite of his friend's behest, and out there fell a cheque for £300

When Douglas told me this story I could not help thinking of similar conduct on the part of poor Ernest Dowson who, though urgently needing money, left a registered letter for several days lying on the floor of a room of my flat in the Boulevard Magenta without mustering up courage to open it. In both cases acute neurasthenia was the cause of this hesitation, but who could have gauged neurasthenia of the blackest hue in the radiant Wilde of the *Importance of Being Earnest* days? In Dowson, it was tuberculosis that was destroying his nervous system, in Oscar, an even more fatal germ

But as to Harris's use of the word "lover" with its foul implication, I should have been inclined to rush over to Nice and shoot the catuiff knave on the Promenade des Anglais, with the comforting certitude that any Alpes-Maritimes jury would acquit me on the atrocious provocation given

I should not, I think, in Douglas's place have given the list of cheques he prints from his pass-book in the Appendix to his *Autobiography*, because any piece of writing can be twisted by the unjust to a malevolent purpose. Compare, for instance, Harris's "he doles him out a few hundreds " Harris adds, "with insults and gibes," against which we have the statement that his last cheque (according to Ross) was accompanied by a kind and tender letter which moved Oscar to tears. I think that in his place I should simply have said "During 1900 my whole capital amounted to £8,000—reduced, by a deliberate fraud on Harris's part, to £6,000, and I can prove that, apart from constant presents in cash whenever I invited him to dinner, I sent my friend during the last ten months of his life £390, which represents considerably more than seven

per cent of my capital that year. True, I had more to come, but I was engaged in a disastrous speculation

"Could more be asked of me than to give considerably more than my entire income for that year to my friend? This money was not of the lightly won, lightly lost quality. It did not come *par la flûte* and ought not to have been allowed to go *par le tambour*. I was 30 years old at the time, I had no profession to depend upon for a living and I knew that once I had dissipated my father's legacy, I should have to fall back on my relations."

I really do not see that he could have acted more generously. It seems to me that Ross's suggestion to Wilde to ask Bosie for a lump sum out of his capital of £6,000 (which after Harris's operation was all he had at the time) was a preposterous one. Oscar was prompted to ask him, and did so ask him for a capital sum sufficient to provide an income of £150 a year, for which at least £3,000 would have been required, because in Oscar's state of health a life annuity, which would have cost less, was obviously out of the question. What living man would have entertained the proposal?

When I wrote in 1901 my *Unhappy Friendship* book, I had no knowledge of these facts. I was away from Paris during the whole of 1900, and the stories that reached me about Oscar's situation on all sides were appalling. Ross himself refers to his "periods of extreme poverty," Gide spoke of him as shabby and actually soliciting alms. Dupoirier had pitiful stories to tell of his days and gave me a copy of the bill he owed him when he died in "the worst inn's worst room," £90—the bill I reproduced in my *Life*, a pathetic document in very sooth, with, as one of the recommendations of this hotel printed upon it, the words "*Sonnerie électrique*!"

I have referred above to Harris's "lying largesses." I wrote exactly what I think about his accounts of the sums of money he gave to Oscar. Take for example that infamous Chapter



XXII (p 450, vol II) to which Harris has given a heading (the only one in the two volumes so emphasized). "A Great Romantic Passion" Here he tells us that having in the fall of 1898 sold his interest in the *Saturday Review* and having previously promised Oscar to take him down to the Riviera for the winter he wired him to expect him in Paris, and says Harris. "I sent him some money to pave the way" He does not specify the amount, but this omission is supplied by Davray, who plays here a curious rôle as translator and renders Harris's vague statement thus "*Je lui envoyai deux cents livres en attendant* (I sent him £200 in the meanwhile) Thus £200.

Possibly Davray here magnifies Harris's liberality in order to compensate him for having entirely suppressed the long paragraph with which this chapter opens, probably because it was a plagiarism from some French author which he found it difficult to manipulate and camouflage in the way he had masked Harris's three impudent plagiarisms from André Gide As I am quoting from the seventh edition of the French version, it is clear that all this was done with the author's approval and consent and that the sum of £200 must stand

He joins Wilde a few days later in Paris at Durand's and gives him "a cheque for £100" Thus, total up till now of £300 At the close of the supper which followed on the dinner Wilde represents himself as penniless—a story Harris has borrowed from Lord Alfred—and, thinking he may need money for the carriage he has ordered for Oscar at 3 a m, gives him a "hundred-franc note" Total £304.

Two days later Oscar tells him he can't leave Paris at once as he has debts to pay Harris gives him £50 in French notes Total £354 The same night Oscar tells him that "more debts have come in" and that he can't be ready to accompany Harris on the train de luxe on the morrow evening to the Riviera Harris tells him to be frank with him and to tell him exactly the amount of what he still owed. Wilde says

he thinks another £50 Harris gives him it Total £404. Two days later "he was again embarrassed" and makes a further demand on Harris's purse Harris does not tell us the amount of the cheque which he then gave him and so all we know definitely about his largesse to "his friend," whom he was taking to the Riviera "to have a perfect six months at his expense," (which he could not have done if he were "bothered with debts,") is that in the six days between Monday and Sunday he actually handed him £404 in cash plus a large cheque drawn, no doubt, on some bank in "ultimate dim Thule" And all this so that his friend and guest should start from Paris free from debt!

And this is the same Harris who later on tells us of the long discussion he had with Wilde before giving him £50 for the scenario and the first act of "Mr and Mrs Daventry" (as it was afterwards called), the same Harris who, though the play evolved from Oscar's brain was then bringing him in hundreds a week, left Oscar to die penniless in Paris on November 30th, although on the 29th he had heard from Ross that his friend was *in extremis*, and has invented a lying story to explain his conduct That the whole chapter in which this largesse of £404 plus the cheque on the Banks of Lethe is described, is a cruel and impudent fabrication from first word to last of its nineteen pages will be irrefutably demonstrated farther on It has been alluded to here to show that Harris is the last person in the world who ought to have accused Alfred Douglas of parsimony, for Douglas's cheques at any rate were on The Piccadilly branch of the National Provincial Bank and not on a phantom financial establishment in some Never-Never Land It was alluded to further to show with what clumsy, self-glorifying stories clever men like George Bernard Shaw, Upton Sinclair, Henri de Régnier and Maître Théry allow themselves to be bamboozled

Harris did not however impose on everybody in France, and

in one of the notices of Davray's translation which Davray did not advertise in the *Mercure de France*, a monthly literary review said to be owned by André Gide, I noticed with pleasure a reference to "the only chapter in which Harris is not giving money to Wilde"

I have said all I wish to say about Harris's treatment of Douglas and his description of the latter's friendship and disagreements with Wilde, to which because it is *matière à scandale* he consecrates about a hundred times as much space as the one or two pages he devoted to a "faithful chronicle" of Wilde's life at Oxford and his important sojourn in Paris in 1883

In the part of the book which is now under review, there is one delightful story of Wilde in the rôle of a father, there is a graphic portrait of Lord Queensberry, while what I may call the Newgate Calendar portion of the biography, where Harris refrains from using his imagination and sticks closely to the contemporary newspaper reports and the special information supplied to him by Ross and other friends, is quite satisfactory though very extended and indiscreet. A very valuable contribution to the story is, however, the account of the interview that he and Shaw had at the Café Royal with Douglas and Wilde, before the Queensberry trial, where Harris advised him to abandon this absurd and hopeless prosecution and to go abroad with Constance. This was the very same advice I had wired him from Paris when I first heard that he had had Queensberry arrested on warrant for criminal libel, knowing as well as the shrewd Harris that an author and journalist of little substance had no earthly chance of getting a verdict against a powerful and wealthy nobleman, posing as an outraged father.

Harris however spoils his story by prefacing it with the obvious fabrication that he had come to this conclusion after making careful inquiries in London about Wilde's character

and antecedents, the result of which investigation he tells us was appalling. He even asks his readers to believe that in pursuit of these inquiries he visited the Public Prosecutor's Office, where "to his horror, his guilt was said to be known and classified." Harris no doubt, in his own esteem, was a very important man in London. He was part owner of a high-class literary weekly with a very limited circulation and had once resided in Park Lane, but those days of splendour were over, for he himself has told us that it was because he was not a householder at the time—and consequently living in lodgings—that he was not allowed to stand bondsman for Wilde when his release on bail was being arranged for. But had he been the wealthiest and most powerful landowner in London he would have had exactly the same reception at the office he refers to. Treasury officials do not issue defamatory statements on private individuals to nosing journalists. I fancy he concocted this from what I wrote in commenting on the case, namely that at Scotland Yard Police Headquarters in London, they have a list of 20,000 perverts whom they do not interfere with unless they attract public notice to themselves. There is a similar list in all great cities—less because, as in Paris, the police do not trouble themselves much about that kind of abnormality, than because if a murder be committed by such a pervert, it can usually be classified at once as such, and so the scope of the inquiry as to the guilty party is enormously narrowed. But under no circumstances would Scotland Yard afford any information about any private individual whose name might be on that list. Such an inquirer would not even be allowed through the front door, otherwise the profession of blackmailers and fabricators of *chroniques scandaleuses* would be rendered too easy and too remunerative.

When Harris states that he called at the Public Prosecutor's office on the Sunday afternoon preceding the opening day of the Queensberry trial, it is, no doubt, his elfin joy at fooling

his readers that makes him choose this particular date, which happens to be April 1st, All Fools' Day. Nor are the conversations between him and Oscar on March 30th and April 1st anything but pure inventions.

According to Harris, Wilde called on him on Friday, March 30th, to ask him, "in his capacity as editor of the *Fortnightly Review*," to come and testify at the forthcoming Queensberry trial that *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was not an immoral book, that he promised to do so, and that Wilde was highly delighted and said that now he was sure to win. At that time Harris was no longer connected with the *Fortnightly Review* and had not been for more than a year. Also, as stated in Harris's report of Wilde's trial at the Old Bailey (on the authority of Sir Edward Clarke) Wilde and Douglas had spent the whole of that Friday at Humphrey's office going over Queensberry's plea of justification, which gave a full list of the witnesses who were going to be called against Wilde, with the charges that it was proposed to establish against him. And Harris asks us to believe that that very same Friday, or possibly next day, on March 31st, Wilde went to Harris to ask him if he would come and say that one of his books was a moral work, that his solicitors had advised him to see Harris for this purpose (as the editor of a review from which Harris had been dismissed, not without obloquy, about eighteen months previously) and that he did not breathe one word about the awful plea of justification which he had just been reading.

Shaw, in his appreciation in the Appendix to Harris's book, gives an account of the meeting at the Café Royal on April 2nd, the day before the opening of the Queensberry trial. He describes how Wilde, accompanied by Douglas, casually finding Shaw and Harris at luncheon at the Café Royal, first broached the subject of Harris's testimony and that then Harris launched out into the tirade which he quotes, telling Wilde—a thing Wilde knew much better than Harris—what was the kind of

evidence the defence was going to bring against him; ending up by the absurd suggestion that he, Wilde, should that very same evening abscond to France leaving his solicitors, counsel and friends *le bec dans l'eau*. Shaw here definitely proves that Harris was lying about his interviews at home with Wilde on March 30th or 31st and on All Fools' Day. Let anybody compare pages 192, 193 to 198 of Harris's book with the account of the Café Royal interview given in the Appendix on pages 23 and 24 of Shaw's *Memories of Oscar Wilde*, and let them still, if they will, believe a single word of Harris's account of these conversations.

And if any of the *populus* which *vult decipi* wants to be assured that Harris's All Fools' Day story about his visit to the office of the Director of Public Prosecutions, 1, Richmond Terrace, Whitehall, where he says he called on April 1st, 1895, and where (to his horror!) Wilde's guilt was said to be known and classified, is anything but a vile slander and a most impudent imposition on public credulity, let me quote from a letter I received on March 10th, 1932, from the then Public Prosecutor himself. It is written in answer to a letter of mine dated March 3rd, in which I informed this gentleman I was publishing a book refuting scandalous libels on a very distinguished Englishman of letters and was respectfully writing to his office to inquire whether I was not justified in saying

- (1) That the Public Prosecutor's Office is not open on Sundays and
- (2) That no information concerning the character and conduct of a private individual, who is under no charge whatever at the time, would be given at your Office to an unauthorized member of the general public, whose inquiries could only be prompted by curiosity

In his answer the Public Prosecutor informs me that "it is impossible to regard the incident which you quote, as founded on fact"; that in reply to the two questions I ask, he begs to

state (1) That the office of the Director of Public Prosecutions "is not officially open on Sundays in the sense that Sunday is not regarded as a working-day in the office." He adds, however, that it is possible to conceive the attendance of the Director himself at his office on a Sunday on some very special occasion. Harris, of course, would say here that his desire to interview the Hon. Hamilton Cuffe on what was known about the morals of Mr. Oscar Wilde was a very special occasion, and that a mere summons on the telephone brought the future Earl of Desart post-haste from his week-end pleasaunce to wait on the great Mr. Harris at the office in Whitehall.

Unfortunately it is impossible to get over this further statement in the letter before me: the Director's assertion that my second question makes a statement which, as framed, is entirely correct and that I am justified in saying that it is perfectly well known that no information concerning a private individual would be given at the office to any unauthorized member of the general public.

But I think that a letter I received from the same grim address dated September 25th, 1933, is even clearer proof that this story of Frank Harris's visit to the Public Prosecutor's office on Sunday, All Fools' Day, 1895, is an absolute fabrication. It comes to me from a highly distinguished gentleman who after forty years' service in the Public Prosecutions Department has not very long since retired to enjoy his leisured ease. In 1895, being a very young man, he would naturally be most keenly interested in everything that was going on. As a junior in the office it would probably devolve upon him to be in attendance on the special occasion of the office being open on a Sunday to look up such files and records as to the conduct of Mr. Oscar Wilde as would be required by the future Earl of Desart to satisfy the great London ex-editor's inquiries. In any case it is perfectly certain that the junior would have heard all about this special occasion, and who is there who

cannot imagine how deeply on the tablets of his memory the circumstances would have engraved themselves when, two days after this visit of the great London editor, the trial of the Marquess at the prosecution of the great London playwright began, and rang through the world followed three days later by the collapse of the prosecution and the arrest and imprisonment of Oscar Wilde? *And what do I find from the gentleman's letter? He has not the faintest recollection about the matter, one way or the other*

How utterly untrue is Harris's description of Oscar Wilde's reputation in London is demonstrated by the fact that his wife Constance was in total ignorance that anything could be charged against his moral behaviour. When the hideous scandal broke forth she revealed herself totally ignorant of the nature of the charges brought against her husband. She was dumbfounded with amazement and horror. Her innocent mind had no conception of such things. And she had lived with Wilde for more than ten years and had borne his children.

But perhaps better proof that Harris's statements of how Wilde stood in evil odour with the public in London for years before his downfall are malicious fabrications may be gathered from an extract from a letter which—in connection with Marjoribanks's odious romancings about Wilde—I received from a well-known sporting baronet, the son of a former Postmaster-General, on whom a baronetcy was conferred for signal services to the Empire. "My father, who was," he writes me, "a most determined hater of perversion (and never allowed a man suspected of homosexual tendencies to become a member of the Bath Club of which he was a founder) personally liked Oscar Wilde very much, and he came several times to lunch at 31 Eaton Square on Sundays and was often at my father's dinners at the House, and as my father was very exigent about personalities he associated with, I flout the idea that Oscar Wilde could ever have been repulsive to



a decent man, as the Prig would have him." This from a man allied by marriage to one of the oldest ducal families in the English aristocracy who, like his father, the Minister, has an instinctive horror and detestation of abnormality and perversion

What I call the "Newgate Calendar" part of Harris's book is where he deals, oh how exhaustively, with the incidents leading up to Queensberry's arrest, followed by the arrest of Oscar Wilde, his life in prison in Holloway, his first trial at the Old Bailey, his release on bail, Harris's fake about the yacht at Erith and his abortive attempt to induce Oscar to give leg-bail, the second trial and Harris's accounts of his visits to him in prison. Here he has the newspaper reports to go on, but his guiding thread all through this mighty maze has been a vivid imagination assisted by copious pulls on my *Unhappy Friendship*. It may be interesting to compare the passage from the latter book, in which I describe the effect produced in certain outcast circles in London by the arrest of the insane poet, with a corresponding passage in Frank Harris (p. 250), especially as it shows how, while indulging his malice against English society, he manages to mask his literary thefts. Thus, in my story, "Calais witnessed a strange invasion." In Harris's, Dover is the port of embarkation for a strange exodus from London. And I most certainly did not refer to Lord Leighton, or to Lord Battersea, or to poor General Macdonald, whom Harris does not name but indicates only too clearly

I wrote

It was indeed a horrible time. A wave of terror swept over the Channel, and the city of Calais witnessed a strange invasion. From the arcana of London a thousand guilty consciences, startled into action by the threat of imminent requitals, came fleeing South. Every outgoing steamer numbered amongst its passengers such nightmare faces as in quiet times one cannot fancy to exist outside the regions of disordered dreams.

And this is the way Harris cooks up my dish and pours liberally over it the *sauce piquante* of his malice and rancour:

The mere news that Oscar Wilde had been arrested and taken to Holloway startled London and gave the signal for a strange exodus. Every train to Dover was crowded, every steamer to Calais thronged with members of the aristocratic and leisured classes. Never was Paris so crowded with members of the English governing classes, here was to be seen a famous ex-Minister, there was the face of the president of a Royal society, at one table in the Café de la Paix, a millionaire recently ennobled, and celebrated for his exquisite taste in art, opposite him a famous general, etc

There is not a word of truth in the last sentence and the only authority Harris had for his aspersions on the four distinguished men alluded to was a foolish and untrue story, current in London at the time, that one of them, on the outbreak of the scandal, took refuge on his steam-yacht and remained there, "full steam on," until Wilde's conviction and sentence, a story which probably also suggested to Harris *The Flying Dutchman* yacht at Erith and his fake about the arrangements for Wilde's escape. And really, O Great-Heart Harris! might not Macdonald's miserable end have moved thy pity and stilled thy viper tongue?

It is one of the saddest recollections of my life in Paris, how one day, walking from the Place Jeanne d'Arc under the colonnade of the rue de Rivoli, I noticed coming towards me a tall, fine, soldierly-looking man with utter despair written on his manly countenance. His throat and lips were working as though to suppress cries of anguish and dismay. I said to myself, "That man, like Dante, has suddenly been brought face to face with hell." An hour or two later I learned that an Englishman had shot himself in the Hôtel Régina, and hurried there at once. I knew the manager, and my police card gained me access to the tiny back bedroom on the top floor in which the tragedy had taken place. There on a camp

bed lay the man whom I had met, and whose distress had so moved me. A military cloak was thrown over his body and his self-inflicted wound was masked by a maculated bandage. There was a travelling-bag in the corner and on the dressing-table were scattered a few indispensable, but not luxurious, articles of toilette

This was Hector Macdonald, on his way to Marseilles and Ceylon, who had that morning received from the War Office a command to return instantly to face at headquarters some grave accusations which had been made against him in the island where he was stationed, and where he was living at the time that Harris described him as in Paris, in flight from London. His untimely death under such miserable trappings, closing a career of such fine achievement and service, which might have finished on the Marne or at Gallipoli, should have muted the tongue even of a Frank Harris

On the same page Harris again dips into my Pierian spring and we read here, as the consequences of Wilde's arrest

The gravest result of the magistrate's refusal to accept bail was purely personal. Oscar's income dried up at the source. His books were withdrawn from sale, no one went to see his plays, every shop-keeper to whom he owed a penny, took immediate action against him. Judgements were obtained and an execution put into his house in Tite Street. Within a month, at the very moment when he most needed money to fee counsel and procure evidence, he was beggared and sold up.

My passage was

On his arrest, almost immediate ruin followed. His sources of income dried up in one hour, his books were withdrawn from sale; the managers suspended the performance of his plays. His creditors clamoured for payment, judgements were obtained against him, and an execution was put into his house in Tite Street. From affluence he passed suddenly to dire poverty at a time when money was needed for his defence, when the utter lack of resources seemed to hold out the menace that he would be left to face the terrible charges which

## THE MEANDERINGS OF MÜNCHAUSEN

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were being accumulated against him without the means to fee counsel or to prepare evidence

Of course, O Imitative Harris! as thou sayest truly, "Nobody went to see his plays" because, like the Spanish Fleet on a famous occasion, "they were not there" The managers had withdrawn them in the high tide of their success as base an act of *cabotin* cowardice towards the author who had enriched them, and who was still to be deemed an innocent man, as the sordid chronicles of the hustings and the mummers in parade upon them record

Plagiarism having blithely carried Harris along, he now pulls another string of the bow with which he is aiming at the golden bull's-eye of public credulity Ah, indeed, he has more than one trick in his bag and the time seems to have come for a little rehearsing of the art of the fakir, who, later on, is to take the centre of the stage in full yachting costume

Wilde has been committed for trial Harris wishes to visit him in prison but of course under more "classy" conditions than a mere Lord Alfred Douglas, who like everybody else visiting prisoners under remand, had had to see the prisoner "under humiliating and tragic conditions" So he goes to the "higher authorities" and gets permission to see Oscar in a private room Sir Matthew White Ridley, the Home Secretary, had no doubt telephoned to the Governor of Holloway Gaol to inform him of the exact day and hour on which the distinguished Harris was to honour the prison with his visit. The Governor has been so impressed that Harris finds him in the prison-entrance, doubtless killing time, which, of course, is without value to a governor of such an establishment, by humming softly to himself

There was I Waiting at the Gate!

Waiting at the Gate! Waiting at the Gate!

The melodious and solitary member of the Holloway Gaol

Frank Harris Reception Committee meets Harris at "the entrance of the prison" and to Harris's "surprise was more than courteous, charmingly kind and sympathetic." So sympathetic indeed that after having expressed great pity for the prisoner and—all this in front of the warders under him—the opinion that he hoped Wilde would soon be free as Holloway was no place for him, he actually escorts Harris—possibly preceded by the prison band—to a "bare room" and then hurries off to fetch Oscar from his cell. He is ever so quick about it, this zealous and nimble Governor, for in a "moment or two" Oscar, accompanied by a warder, arrives on the scene.

Harris does not give the date of this memorable visit but indicates that it took place very shortly after Oscar's confinement there, so that one may safely place it somewhere between the 5th and the 16th of April, 1895. The former date is that of Oscar's arrest, the second is the date of a letter which I received from Oscar in Paris. This is the letter. It will be noticed that Wilde makes no reference to Harris and indeed speaks of Alfred Douglas as his sole visitor.

L P  
 C 4  
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 3 56

From *Wilde*

H M PRISON,

HOLLOWAY

16-4-1895

MY DEAR ROBERT,

You good, daring, reckless friend! I was delighted to get your letter, with all its wonderful news. For myself, I am ill—apathetic. Slowly life creeps out of me. Nothing but Alfred Douglas's daily visits quicken me into life, and even him I only see under humiliating and tragic conditions.

Don't fight more than 6 duels a week! I suppose Sarah is hopeless; but your chivalrous friendship—your fine chivalrous friendship—is worth more than all the money in the world.

Yours,

OSCAR

Not a word, it will be noted, about Frank Harris, who was well known to me and who had been introduced to me by Oscar himself years previously. Having nothing whatever to write about and knowing I should have been delighted to hear Harris had been to see him, because he knew the opinion I had at the time of this friend, Wilde would have made a point of telling me about Harris. So the visit certainly did not take place before the 16th. I am rather doubtful that it ever took place at all—certainly Oscar never said a word about it when I met him three weeks later—and I think if Harris did go to see Wilde at Holloway, it was in the ordinary "reception room" where his conversation would have to be carried on from behind bars, across a space of one yard with Wilde on the other side in "a kind of horrible cage and in almost complete darkness, with twenty other people talking at the same time," as Douglas described his own visits to Holloway. Under these conditions the seven-page conversation he describes on pages 261 to 267 would have been impossible and even Harris would not have had the impudence to tell us it took place. He would thus have been spared showing himself in a very despicable light in printing this imaginary conversation.

I am not referring here to his copying from my book an incident which occurred while I was visiting Wilde later on at Wandsworth Gaol, where a warder forbade me to address my friend in French, with a gruff "Stow that now! No foreign languages here!" because in that Harris only shows that he is ignorant that the same rules do not govern interviews with convicted prisoners and those only on remand. No,

what I refer to is the passage where he advises Oscar how to affront the Court at the forthcoming trial, how to defend himself; the passage where he was "speaking with rage in his heart" and with his eyes "albeit unused to the melting mood" dropping "tears as fast as the Arabian trees their medicinal gum." The only satisfaction that poor Oscar and his many friends derived from all the horrors of that first abortive trial was the veritable triumph that the prisoner won by his splendid definition of the love surpassing the love of women that one man may feel for another man, "the great affection of an older for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very base of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare—a deep spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect" given in answer to a question in cross-examination, an answer in which he indeed showed himself a "lord of language," an answer which provoked loud applause in Court and of which afterwards Robert Buchanan, the Scotch poet, said that it was the finest thing in forensic literature since St Paul's defence before Agrippa

Well, for this poor triumph for Oscar, Harris tries to take the credit to himself. In the passage which in a "talkie" he could only have delivered after a liberal use of the glycerine-bottle he quotes himself as saying to Oscar, amongst much else. "Defend yourself as David would have defended his love for Jonathan. Make them all listen to you. I would take care to get free with half your talent even if I were guilty . . ."

But what I think definitely proves that if the visit took place at all the conversation reported is purely imaginary, is that there is not a word spoken by Oscar on a subject of the greatest importance and of keenest anxiety to him during those three weeks of detention, and that was his entire absence of means for his defence. Until Sir Edward Clarke and Charles Matthews generously undertook to defend him at the Old Bailey

for nothing, he was faced with the prospect of having to ask the judge to assign him a defender in Court—an Old Bailey “soup” as they are called—the gentlemen of the Bar who for a guinea fee will accept a dock brief over the railings of the “awful pen.”

I know something about Oscar’s position at the time, for it was I who was delegated to go to Sarah Bernhardt on his behalf and to try and induce her to purchase all rights in *Salomé* for from 1,500 to 2,000 dollars. I told the story of this futile quest in detail thirty years ago and don’t wish to repeat it here, but in brief Sarah after promising help and keeping me on the run for a week refused to part with a single red cent and so threw away the certitude of a large fortune—certainly more than half a million dollars. This is what Wilde refers to in the letter I have quoted. Wilde’s entire hopes for enough money to pay for his defence rested on the outcome of my negotiations with Sarah, and is anyone going to believe that not a word about this or about his desperate financial position would have been said during his interview with Harris, or that had Harris asked him “Is there anything I can do for you, nothing that you want?” Wilde would meekly answer “No, Frank, it was kind of you to come to see me, I wish I could tell you how kind.”

It seems to me Harris’s imagination failed him here, for with my book before him, he might have made Wilde say “Yes, Frank, I wish you would see what Sherard is doing about my business with Sarah. He wired me some days ago she had agreed to buy *Salomé* and I was so relieved, as I have no other resources in the world.” This would have given him an opportunity to pose as the generous friend and Wilde might have been made to refuse his offers pending Sarah’s final decision. It would all have sounded infinitely more probable than the stuff he describes himself as talking on David and Jonathan, on watches, on the Apologia of Plato, on cigar-



ettes, the "deathless smiling courage of Socrates," on the prison grub, on Jesus Christ and Athens and shortsightedness and Galileo and Giordano Bruno (O great O. Henry!); while Oscar bursting with the desire to yell out "It's me for the Mazuma" babbles of June days in London and "sunshine dappling the grass, quotes Wordsworth on "the wind in the trees," touches on the last hours of Socrates, nods his head to show how Frank has encouraged him, asks him if he "really thinks he can win," and lets the golden galleon sail out into the corridor without a single word to indicate that he is in desperate straits for money, he whom Harris has described as quite unscrupulous about asking people, even Harris, for loans.

No! He lets Harris go forth into the corridor, where, look you now!, Harris finds the Governor waiting for him "almost at the door," (not that he suggests he might have had his ear to the keyhole to catch Harris's winged words) who escorts him to the exit where they shake hands and where in the Harris-talkie (if Shaw had only consented) the glycerine bottle would have come into use again for both of them, for, says Harris "We shook hands I think there were tears in both our eyes "

His account of the first trial at the Old Bailey, which he professes to have listened to from first to last, is as good as the newspaper reports at the time made it and his comments on the gross unfairness of trying the two prisoners together and on the obvious prejudice of the judge, and so on, are shrewd and effective I was in Paris at the time and so cannot say whether he was there or not He certainly was *not* in court on the last day of the second criminal trial, when Wilde was convicted and sentenced, for I was there during the whole of that terrible afternoon But more of this later

## CHAPTER XIII

### *THE FLYING DUTCHMAN AT ERITH*

HARRIS, no doubt, purposely concealed his knowledge of the facts as to how the amount of Oscar's bail was gotten together and who were the bondsmen. If he had stated the truth, that it was Ernest Leverton, of Courtfield Gardens, who found £700 for Stewart Headlam to enable the latter—with Percy Douglas's £550—to give surety for £1,250, he would greatly have diminished the credibility of the impudent, self-glorifying fabrication which follows immediately on the paragraph about his anxiety to stand as one of Oscar's sureties himself (p. 278).

This fabrication concerns the effort he made to induce Wilde to flee the country and his alleged arrangements to effect the escape. This is one of the stories in his storybook which has won him the most kudos, the lyrical approbation of George Bernard Shaw and the "noble cœur"-s' and "quel brave homme"-s' of his French dupes.

There is not one word of truth in the whole story from his.

As soon as the bail was accepted I began to make my preparations for Oscar's escape

on page 278, down to the atrocious lie on page 300 about Willy Wilde, which forms a fitting peroration to the whole mendacious patter. Here it is:

He got out and went into the house, the gloomy sordid house where the brother lived who would sell his blood for a price.

Immediately after announcing his decision to do "something

to save Oscar from the wolves," he gives as one reason for his desperate determination that

For the first time in my life I understood the full significance of Montaigne's confession that if he were accused of stealing the towers of Notre Dame Cathedral he would fly the kingdom rather than risk a trial, and Montaigne was a lawyer

Stimulated by Montaigne, Harris "set to work at once to complete his preparations "

The simple truth is that it was I, and I alone, who proposed to Oscar to escort him out of the country and it was I who quoted Montaigne to him, as may be seen in the following extract from my *Unhappy Friendship* (p 158)

I visited him (Wilde) every day, and stayed with him almost all the time When the subject of flight was discussed, I declared that in my opinion it was the best thing that he could do, not only in his own interests, but in those of the public also, and I offered to take the whole care and responsibility of the evasion on my shoulders, with all the odium that would afterwards attach to me " 'If I were accused,' " said Montaigne, I quoted, " 'of stealing the towers of Notre Dame Cathedral, the very first thing I should do would be to cross the frontier ' You have stood one trial, and the fact that you have been released on bail shows that they want you to go "

I certainly did not project to help him to "fly the kingdom" like Harris, but to flee England with an ordinary return-ticket from Charing Cross Aeroplanes had not in 1895 yet been invented and balloons were hazardous and uncertain so that instead of landing Oscar in the fair land of France we might ignominiously, after a circular trip round London, have descended in the very yard off Whitehall which takes its name from Scotland, and money was so very, very short in Oakley Street that in order to get rid of me and send me back to France, so that all this scheming about flight might be put a stop to, Willy one night in bed announced to his wife (who told it me next morning at breakfast with shouts of laughter) that he had

definitely decided to "sell his library in order to supply me with the funds for my transportation "

I suppose it was my book that suggested to Harris to concoct these ridiculous stories. Ridiculous, because only a few pages previously he had informed us how it would have utterly ruined him if he had even ventured to defend Wilde in his *Saturday Review*. According to his account the Messrs W. H. Smith & Son had informed him that they would not put on sale any journal containing anything in Wilde's favour, and he indicates that he was not in a position to face the utter ruin of his journal; yet in this story he wants us to believe that he was anxious and willing to engineer Wilde's flight, which would have been a thousand times more detrimental to his business standing in London and the very existence of the *Saturday Review* than the mere publication in that review of a plea that until he was actually convicted Wilde should not be considered guilty.

But Harris had a melodramatic incident to fabricate and one that would redound to the credit of the "pirate from the Spanish main," which had always been his favourite posture. So, from plagiarizing my books for his faithful chronicle, he lightheartedly proceeds to substitute himself, on the "*Ote-toi de là, que je m'y mette*" principle, for me *in propria personâ* in this matter of reckless sacrifice for a friend. Not that I had to fear the same orbicular ruin which would have attended him and his journal, or the public disgrace that would have banned his friend, the Jewish gentleman, "a man of the widest culture," who lent him a yacht (*The Flying Dutchman*) at moorings in the Thames at Erith, from society for ever, when the scandal of Wilde's escape should have shaken London and the circumstances of the adventure with the names of those who had taken part in it should have become of public notoriety; all of which was invented to shed a brighter halo on his head and make his sacrifice so infinitely greater than mine would have been.

My scheme was neither dramatic nor pictorial, it was just plain common sense. I was to escort Wilde, who would have been furnished with a return-ticket, (unlike the victims of Fenayrou and Landru for whom only single tickets were purchased because, like Wilde, they were *not coming back*), by night-train and steamer to Paris via Southampton—Havre on a week's visit to a small cottage I had in the country at Auvers-sur-Oise. There a diplomatic malady would have fallen him, a medical *certificat de complaisance* could have been obtained with the greatest ease, testifying to the impossibility of his using his return half for the round trip back to the Old Bailey, and Time would have done the rest

I was well up in the law and I knew that he had nothing to fear from police interference or, with only one exception, anything to imperil the perfect success of this healthful hegira. Perhaps the following confirmation of this statement, which also indicates the one possible snag in our way, may be read with interest. It comes from the late Lord Russell who was—though not at the time he wrote this letter—a member of Ramsay MacDonald's Socialist Cabinet and who it may be remembered was an able practising solicitor. When I was preparing for this book and wanted a document to show that Harris's story was on the face of it absurd and that my common-sense plan was one with which the police could in no way have interfered, I had a letter of inquiry on the law written to Lord Russell and on May 31st, 1928, there was written from Dyke House, Methwold, Brandon, Suffolk (his lordship's residence) the following reply

"A man who is out on bail is entirely free until the time comes when he has to surrender to his bail. The only persons who can arrest him are his sureties. If they think he is going to skip his bail they or either of them can give him into custody for their own security. OSCAR COULD HAVE SKIPPED."

HIS BAIL AND OUGHT TO HAVE DONE" [The capitals are mine]

Yours Truly,

RUSSELL.

Here is indicated the snag I referred to. While Percy Douglas Great-Heart was quite willing to lose his £1,800—all he had in the world at the time, he had told me, when I asked him if he would allow Wilde to go. "Let him go in God's name if he is in any danger," said this kindest of *grands seigneurs*.

With Ernest Leveson, however, it was different. He was involved to the extent of the £700 which he had supplied to Stewart Headlam and had no wish at all to see this sum estreated with the rest of the £2,500. In fact he was determined that it should not be, if he could prevent it. He gave me very clearly to understand that if he saw or heard of any preparations for flight on Oscar's part he would at once oblige Stewart Headlam to withdraw his bond. I had rushed over specially from Paris, as soon as Wilde was released on bail, to bring him back to France with me and I was not a *persona grata* at Courtfield Gardens in consequence. So little so that I was purposely not asked to attend the dinner there at which Oscar's future movements were to be finally discussed, because Leveson knew what I considered Oscar's sole hope of safety. Harris was invited and mentions the dinner at the Levesons' but does not refer in any way to the discussion that then and there went on. It was finally decided that Oscar should remain in London and "face the music," and he then and there gave Leveson his promise to do so. If Leveson had suspected that Harris was not only trying to induce Oscar to skip his bail but had carried out elaborate arrangements to ensure his flight, Harris would not have been asked to attend the conference from which I was excluded. But Harris had never breathed a word on the subject, or indicated his views in the

faintest. I fancy that when he was concocting his clumsy fiction, Harris "visualized" Leverson in the rôle of the generous and kindhearted Israelite, who, though "he had no sympathy with Wilde's vice," was "only too glad" to place his steam-yacht, then lying at Erith, at Harris's entire disposal "for such work as that without money," because "it was horrible that such a man as Wilde should be treated as a common criminal "

I imagine that when Harris decided to substitute himself for me as the would-be rescuer of Wilde, it was the story about the "famous ex-Minister" that suggested the steam-yacht, and that the wealthy Ernest Leverson suggested the benevolent Jew and so the clumsy fable was compounded. I expect that it was to make the story sound more plausible that he pretended to be ignorant that Leverson was bailman to the extent of £700, just as he conceals the fact that all along Leverson had expressed it as his clear opinion that Oscar must stay in England and face his trial, though I cannot say that Leverson had actually told him, as he told me, that if Oscar tried to bolt he would have him arrested. At that dinner-party Harris would hear Leverson very emphatically on the subject and he would also hear Wilde give his undertaking to remain. Yet all the while, he would have us believe, his plans had been fully completed, the two-horse brougham was waiting at the Park Gates, the yacht was under steam for an unknown destination, a *recherché* supper had been ordered on board, and all that Oscar had to do was to allow himself to be driven at a "*gallop ventre à terre*" to Erith when he broached the subject to Wilde as they were walking away from the Leversons'

He really asks us to believe—and Shaw and others do actually believe—that he proposed to Wilde to come away in his dinner-jacket, without a scrap of personal luggage, to undertake the journey from Courtfield Gardens, S W, to Erith on the Thames, a drive which would have taken him hours and hours

and hardly have landed them in Erith—which is *not* “a little landing-place on the Thames” but a busy river-port of over 35,000 inhabitants, in Kent, which could only be reached after traversing the whole of London and miles of country beyond—in broad daylight. Wilde was to come away after breaking his ten-minute-old promise to Levenson, without one word of farewell to the old mother, slowly sinking into her grave, whom he loved so dearly and who had conjured him by all he held sacred in his love for her and his pride in the family honour not to brand himself as guilty by fleeing from his trial, and had indeed said that should he run away she would never as long as she lingered on, speak to him again. And with the certitude that long before the two-pair brougham reached the borders of Kent, the anxious Willy would have inquired of the Levensons why Oscar had not reached home and that Levenson would have acted promptly, that Scotland Yard would have been put on the alert and all agog, that the mysterious yacht which had been for days lying at moorings there had already been the subject of curious conjecture at Police Headquarters; that ports—now that Levenson had demanded the arrest of Oscar Wilde—would have been all on the *qui vive*, that it takes even a steam-yacht under “one hundred lbs steam-pressure to the square inch”—all “greyhound on the leash” and all “ready to start at a moment’s notice,” as she might be described by Harris—quite a long time to settle up her dues and get her papers and clear her moorings, and that by that time, the presence on board of a tall and bulky stranger, obviously a fugitive from justice, dressed in evening clothes, and accompanied by a shortish man resembling a pirate from the Spanish Main would have been known all over Erith, and communicated from the harbour-police station to the authorities in London. It is a ridiculous and puerile invention, yet it has duped the shrewd and lucid Shaw and thousands of readers of Harris’s *roman pour la portière*



The absurdity of Harris's story is further proved by the fact—a fact which Harris seems to have overlooked when he pitched on Erith as the mooring of *The Flying Dutchman* (as I have baptized his phantom yacht)—that just at that time in 1895 the Royal Corinthian Yacht Club was stationed there. I have made very careful inquiries on the spot and at Burnham-on-Crouch, Essex, the headquarters of the R C Y C., and so I am speaking on authority. Imagine the curiosity that would have been aroused amongst these yachtsmen and their crews if a large, mysterious steam-yacht, with full steam on, capable of 15 knots an hour, with a steam pressure of 100 lbs to the square inch, had been kept there for days together! How long would it have been before the news got about the place and how long before it was known at Erith Yacht Club, Riverside, that a secret flight was in preparation? Harris should have taken a little more trouble in arranging this stupid story, he would have done better to fix the clandestine embarkation at Deal, as suggested by Bernard Shaw to be a much more likely place for it.

Harris in the days when he was still friends with Lord Alfred Douglas seems to have been able to convince him that the story of *The Flying Dutchman* was true in every respect, and this accounts possibly for references by Douglas in his *Autobiography* to his belief at that time in this nautical romance. He adds, doubtless on Harris's authority, that the "wealthy Jew" who lent Harris *The Flying Dutchman* was a Member of Parliament. The person that Harris had then in mind was Harry Marks. Unfortunately at that time Marks was not a Member of Parliament—he only became one after the Wilde scandal that caused the collapse of the then Government and brought about the General Election of 1895. Marks had no sympathy whatever with Wilde, and is it likely that so shrewd a man, who was then preparing his candidature for a seat which he afterwards won, would be willing to mix himself up in such

an appalling scandal as would have been caused by Wilde's escape in a yacht he lent for the purpose?

I have had very, very careful inquiries made at Erith and have ascertained that none of the Jewish gentlemen who were in Parliament before the election of 1895 even possessed a yacht. The secretary of the Club down there was kind enough to make most exhaustive inquiries and search all the books in the Harbour-Master's archives, and he wrote to me very definitely that I was quite justified in describing the whole of Harris's story about the steam-yacht lying there during the month of May as a pure fake.

One's indignation against Harris must always, however, be modified by observing the elfin joy with which, with his tongue in his cheek, he delights in making fools of his readers. He tells us that when the idea of rescuing Wilde first occurred to him and the project of *The Flying Dutchman* first germed in his mind, he was just on the point of going down to Cowes to hire a yacht—the very place, of course, where he would be likely to find a yacht on hire. It occurred to me that this was just as sensible a suggestion as if, finding his domestic coal scuttle empty, he had proposed to go down to Newcastle to get it filled.

Consider also the glee with which he must have indited the passage describing his drive home to Oakley Street and, having occasion to speak to the coachman of the brougham, he puts his head out of the window and addresses him as "Robert." It no doubt occurred to him that I, the originator of the escape plan, ought really in common justice to have some small rôle to play in the piece, and therefore bestows my Christian name on the driver. Quite an honourable position, Harris would think, reflecting that it was no less a person than Count Fersen who, disguised as the coachman, drove the barouche from the Tuileries to Varennes.

Harris, who must always be bragging about money, says he

tried to overcome Wilde's scruples about leaving his sureties in the lurch by gallantly offering to recoup their loss out of his own pocket, to find the £2,500 required. It does not occur to him that if such action was within his power, it would have been ever so much simpler to have divulged his plan at the meeting that night, to have produced the £700 for Levenson then and there and to have asked Percy Douglas over the telephone to accompany the exodus down to Erith, which the great-hearted fellow would certainly have done. Levenson had no objection to the "*Evanescence of Oscar*," but he did most strongly object to seeing his seven hundred "yellow boys" evanescing synchronously. Money, however, talks and if Harris had produced the £700 in banknotes, why, I believe Ernest Levenson would have ordered up a Jeroboam of the finest bubbly to provide the hardy mariners with a fitting stirrup-cup.

Oscar, however, refuses, as he certainly would have refused if the proposal had ever really been made to him. I am as certain that it was never made, and that Harris's story is all a stupid lie, as that I am alive and am breathing. Apart from the inherent absurdities and contradictions of the story, I have, to convince me, the fact that not a word of this project was ever breathed to me by Oscar or anybody else at Oakley Street and that even Lady Wilde obviously never heard about Harris's proposal. I know—because I was waiting up for Oscar, terribly anxious to hear the result of the consultation—that he came home that night alone in a hansom cab from Courtfield Gardens, because I answered his ring and saw the cab driving away empty. He never spoke of this suggested flight, indeed he never spoke to me of Harris at all. As a matter of fact Harris only saw Wilde and was in his company twice, the first time for the few minutes when he came to take him out to the Café Royal and the second time when they were together that night at the Levensons'. Further, during the three or

four days I spent with him after his release from prison in 1897, at Berneval, near Dieppe, we sometimes discussed my proposal of flight and he always said he was not sorry that he had not run away, but he never referred to any other plan of escape, as he certainly would have done. Further still, on the night of the 22nd of May after the trial and conviction of Taylor it was, alas! too tardily, decided that Oscar's only chance of safety was to get away out of the country at once. Even Willy agreed on this, and his wife came and very earnestly begged me to do what I had undertaken to do when I first came to London a fortnight previously. Of course, then it was far too late, for his temporary freedom only extended till the next morning at 9 a.m. and nothing could then be done. But it seems to me that if Harris's story had had a word of truth in it, he would surely then have appeared at the house of mourning in the spanking two-horse brougham to make a final desperate effort to force Oscar to compliance.

For had he not, as he says, told Oscar that the yacht would be waiting for him till the very day of the trial, and the brougham, too?

The story is an impudent fabrication concocted for his own aggrandisement, and as such I should not even have referred to it here because it is indifferent to me that Harris should glorify his own person and character. Neither do I object in the least to his substituting himself for me in a romantic rôle. I am only concerned, in dealing with his book, in a refutation of his vilification of Wilde, and in the exposure as fabricated of the *confessions* with which his book crawls. But I could not let pass the atrocious calumny on Willy Wilde which Harris in this conversation attributes to Oscar and which figures in the last sentence of this story, quoted above. Harris actually makes Oscar Wilde say of his brother that "if I were not in Oakley Street to-night Willy would tell the police," and that in answer to a further argument of Harris he added that Willy

had made his (Oscar's) solicitors buy letters of his (Oscar's); "He has blackmailed me" Why on earth Harris should have invented such a story and have made Oscar thus traduce his brother with an absolutely false statement, I cannot conceive, unless he had some malicious grudge against the dead Willy Wilde. Willy stood by his brother most loyally all through his time of trouble and there is not a fragment of truth in this invention about him

Although I was quite convinced of this fact I did write to Messrs Humphreys to ask them if there was any trace of such a transaction in their books, and on April 28th, 1928, I received from Mr Robert Humphreys, who is the present head of this honourable firm, a letter in which he states that all the papers in the Wilde case having been destroyed many years ago, he was unable to help me without looking up entries made thirty-three years previously, which would involve an exhaustive search. He adds "Personally speaking, although I acted for the defence of Mr Oscar Wilde and saw Willy Wilde frequently, I have no recollection of the incident you mention" This makes me say that I am quite sure that such an incident did not take place, apart from my knowledge of Willy Wilde; because I am sure that the record of such an incident would have bitten into the tablets of the memory of such a man as Mr Robert Humphreys with the vitriol of disgust and indignation, even though as a London solicitor with a wide practice many incidents of appalling though perhaps not equal turpitude must have come under his notice. And as to Oscar so defaming his brother *mais glissons, glissons, pour l'amour de Dieu*

It is difficult to understand Harris in his rôle as a "faithful chronicler" From a reckless desire to create a sensation at any cost, from an urge to represent himself in a noble light, or just from an elfin desire to see how far the public is gullible he prints in the text of his book a "confession" from Wilde's lips and then in the appendix publishes a passage from the *De*

*Profundis* letter, which is in flat contradiction of Wilde's statement (or rather of the statement falsely attributed to Wilde by Harris).

I am referring to the "confession" on page 286, where Wilde admits the charges for which he was to stand his trial. Harris has just adjudged himself a brevet for legal knowledge and acumen by predicting that the fatal evidence of the young book-clerk, Shelley, would be ruled out at the next trial, which is exactly what took place, but it is so easy to be wise after the event. He then makes Oscar say "Oh, Frank, you talk with passion and conviction, as if I were innocent." "But you are innocent," I cried in amaze, "aren't you?" Oscar is represented as saying that he thought Harris had known all along (or at least since his visit to the Public Prosecutor's Office) that he was guilty of the charges made against him at the first trial which were to be repeated in the second indictment. He also suggests, "timidly putting out his hand," that this will make a great difference in Harris's feelings towards him. Harris, who has been "staring at him stupidly," now sees the fine rôle there is for him to play here, the *scène à faire*, as Sarcey would have called it, and remembering that he is a "pirate from the Spanish Main" (or a rat from the main sewer) jettisons all moral scruples and tells Oscar that it has "made no difference at all" and certainly will not stop for one moment his Jupiter-like descent on the Danæ of Oscar, nor the shower of fairy gold.

I have already demonstrated that this conversation never took place at all, that Oscar did not go out with Harris on that day and so was not with him when this alleged confession was made. Oscar himself always most emphatically denied to everybody the charges to which, according to Harris, he pleaded guilty on that imaginary occasion. When the whole of *De Profundis*, which Douglas has authorized Methuen to publish in the new edition of Wilde's complete works, edited by Mr.

A. J. A Symons, comes out, his emphatic plea of innocence addressed to the friend to whom he is writing will be found there for all to read It is not likely he would have written this to Douglas, who knew all about him, if a few months previously he had confessed his guilt to Harris, who would at once have communicated it to Douglas

Harris's first volume, "the indictment against English society," closes with a fairly accurate description (taken from newspaper reports) of Wilde's last trial, but he is not telling the truth when he describes his own presence in Court on May 25th, 1895, the last day, on which Wilde was convicted and sentenced I cannot say whether he was present on the preceding days, but I can most definitely deny his presence there on May 25th, during the last sad hours I had purposely kept away till then, but on that last afternoon, "as that fatal Saturday dragged on, the impulse grew stronger and stronger within me to go to him, so as to be with him at the end " So having met Ernest Dowson, who felt the same as I did, I went with him to the Old Bailey and was in Court, sitting just behind the Attorney-General, Sir Frank Lockwood, from just after the retirement of the jury till the verdict and sentence had been pronounced

The jury was out a long while and I had every opportunity to ascertain *de visu* what persons were in "at the kill " Most carefully did I scrutinize every face in the gallery which overhung the dock, in the "City Lands" pews, on the barristers' benches, in the well of the court It helped to kill time, time heavy as lead I made a note at the moment of the names of all whom I recognized, but can only now remember the presence of Percy Douglas Great-Heart, whose eyes filled with tears while Wills, spitting and snarling, passed sentence He was standing on the left of the dock I had specially looked to see if Harris were there, because apart from Lord Douglas of Hawick none of Wilde's former friends were present. Harris was not.

After I had got out into the Old Bailey, outside the Court, I witnessed the scene described in my *Unhappy Friendship* as follows:

As I staggered down the steps to leave the courthouse, I dimly heard the cries of exultation which those crowding down with me were uttering. But this fiendish joy in the ruin of a life was to be impressed upon me still more vividly. For when the verdict and sentence on "the aristocrat" reached the rabble in the Old Bailey, men and women joined hands and danced an ungainly farandole, where ragged petticoats and yawning boots flung up the London mud in *feu de joie*, and the hideous faces watched this dance of death for a few minutes . . . and whilst I was standing there, I saw the Evidence, still laughing and smoking cigarettes, being driven off in cabs. And I said to Dowson . . . etc

Harris having shown that he was not in Court by recording that after Wills had passed sentence there were cries of "Shame!" and hisses in Court, also that "Wilde ROSE" and asked the judge if he might not say something, adds artistic verisimilitude to his narrative by transferring the above description of the scene in the Old Bailey, duly paraphrased, from my book to his and tells his readers that

We had not left the court when the cheering broke out in the streets, and when we came outside there were troops of the lowest women of the town, dancing together and kicking up their legs in hideous abandonment. As I turned away I caught a glimpse of Wood and the Parkers getting into a cab, laughing and leering

A very faithful chronicle, Mr Bernard Shaw, but not Frank Harris's!



## CHAPTER XIV

### WHERE "FAKIR" BOLTS

THE insincerity of Harris's professions of keen interest in and deep affection for Oscar Wilde is, I think, clearly shown by the fact that though he lived in London and, according to his own account, could do just anything he liked with the highest Government officials, he never made the least effort to see Wilde in prison until the summer of 1896, "a year or so" after Wilde's incarceration, at a time when it was being bruited abroad that Wilde had been allowed the use of writing materials and was supposed to be engaged on literary composition, in the intervals of picking oakum and turning the crank. This news would suggest to Harris, editor and business-man, that there might be eventual profit for him in renewing the acquaintance of the disgraced prisoner. From the day of Wilde's conviction till the middle of September, when I induced Constance Wilde to come to England and visit her husband—when she was reconciled to him—not a living soul, except myself, went near the unhappy man. He "became due" for a visit from two friends on August 25th, and I at once applied to the Governor to be allowed to come and see him on that day. I duly received my pass. It was available for two persons, but mine was the only name inscribed upon it. Where was Harris that day and why had he not applied? Why did he give no sign of life even after my visit had been described far and wide in the Press, chiefly with malevolent comment? We were friends at the time and he could have come to me or have sent the two-horse brougham to take me to him in his

exalted sphere to hear from me an account of my visit to Wandsworth Gaol, more circumstantial and less prudently reserved than I had given to the interviewer who intercepted me at the prison gate, as I was leaving. But no! Not a word, not a sign, the dead might bury their dead.

In his book (we are now in Vol II) he describes his mental anguish, his gnawing anxiety about his friend's welfare during these months of his living interment, but does not record having made the slightest effort—even to the extent of writing me a postcard—to get at the facts about him. Possibly he felt that Oscar might not be particularly pleased to see him, boisterous, truculent, boasting, and perhaps in this surmise he would have been right because, as Constance wrote me after she had seen her husband—it is the same letter in which she expressed the conviction that Oscar had been mad for the past three years—he was averse from contact with former acquaintances. As she wrote:

I thank you for your kindness to a fallen friend, you are kind and gentle to him, and you are, I think, the only person he can bear to see

When fifteen or twenty years later Harris began on his "faithful chronicle" and had decided that he must posture as Wilde's devoted friend, as his tolerant, broadminded, all-comprehending, all-absolving father-confessor, the only excuse he can adduce for his total neglect of Wilde during this whole "year or so," is that (p 326) "For months and months the situation in South Africa took all my heart and soul "

He tells us that in January, 1896, he sailed for Capetown. The Jameson Raid had taken place and naturally his presence there was indispensable when one remembers "the absorbing work by day and night" that he had to do for the *Saturday Review*. He got back to England in the summer of 1896, but even then he had no time to trouble about his friend, for his "task of defending the Boer farmers grew more and more

arduous," and he therefore had to console himself about Oscar with the news that "he was going on as well as could be expected."

Truly, Mr George Bernard Shaw, it would have been difficult for him to carry his kindness further!

Before continuing the examination of his narrative, I would like to say—reverting to Lord Macaulay's comparison of the merits of the Johnson biographies to a horse-race won by "Eclipse," with the rest nowhere—that from before Wilde's arrest, the good horse "Fakır" (H Wiper up) has obviously taken the bit between his teeth and gallops on to victory and the laurel-wreath of G B Shaw's high approbation, with the dope dripping from his muzzle and the foam flying back. Harris in all the remainder of his book, the whole of the second volume being included, seems to have said to himself "Well, if the public has followed my story so far, it's evident that fake is the stuff to give 'em *Populus vult decipi*, and I'm therefore the man to deliver the goods" There is hardly a page in the whole of the second volume which does not reek of falsehood—absurd inventions to demonstrate the author's utter contempt for his gullible readers throughout

It was, it appears, Oscar's "friends" who coming to Harris with dreadful tales about Oscar's condition in June, 1896, tore him away from his Boer farmers and prompted him at long last to try and do something for his friend Accordingly he solicits an interview from Sir Evelyn Ruggles-Brise, who after consultation with Sir Matthew White Ridley, the Home Secretary, appoints him, Frank Harris, as a special Commissioner, to go down to Reading Gaol and examine into Wilde's condition and to listen to his complaints and deliver a report on which Sir Ruggles-Brise would undertake to make the Home Secretary act on Wilde's behalf! Leaving aside the fact that there was nobody in the London newspaper world less likely to be selected for such a confidential post than Frank

Harris, who for his defence of the Boers and his unpatriotic attacks in this matter on the British Government was a *persona ingratis* in Whitehall at the time, it should be remembered by those who are inclined to believe this absurd story that already a month or two previously the Home Office had had Wilde's case fully examined into by two Whitehall medical experts who went down to Reading, who had had him "under observation" at the prison and had returned to Whitehall to report that he was perfectly sane and that he seemed quite happy. In consequence of this report—

When eventually a petition was prepared by "some eminent persons in high positions in the Church and the learned professions, whose calling and character placed them beyond the suspicion of having any prejudice in favour of the prisoner, or of any laxity of view with regard to offences of the kind for which Wilde had been convicted," in which special stress was laid upon the danger to the man's mentality, an intimation was received from the Home Secretary that it would be useless to present it as the case of this prisoner has been the subject of careful inquiry and consideration, and that as a result the Home Secretary has come to the conclusion that no grounds, medical or other, exist which would justify him in advising any mitigation of the sentence.

And after this Harris wants people to believe that all he had to do to brush aside this decision was to introduce himself to the Chairman of the Prison Commission so as to be asked by him to go down to Reading and report on Wilde's condition, a few weeks after the experts had done this so fully. He wants us to believe that the Home Secretary but why continue?

When I had read this extraordinary invention, I asked a lady in London, who was as indignant as I am, about Harris's lying book, to ask Sir Ruggles-Brise if he had any recollection of suggesting this commissionership and of getting Sir Matthew White Ridley so to appoint Frank Harris. His answer, dated April 1st, 1928, was as follows

GEORGE, FRANK AND OSCAR

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MADAM,

I have no information on the points to which your letter refers. You should apply to the Prison Commissioners, Home Office, S W.

Yrs faithfully,

E. RUGGLES-BRISE.

In other words he knew nothing about the matter The letter is a holograph

This dispenses me from analysing in detail the absurdities of the imaginary conversations between himself and Sir Evelyn before and after his visit to Reading, if such a visit—of which I never heard a word then or afterwards—ever took place at all Wilde was “due” for a visit on February 25th, May 25th and August 25th On none of these occasions did Harris accompany me or Ross to Reading It must have taken place, if at all, some time in June, 1896, because Major Isaacson who left Reading Gaol on July 1st was Governor at the time of Harris’s alleged inspection Possibly, through an application to Sir Evelyn, Harris got a permit to go and see Wilde, but I have my doubts because such permits were not issued unless the applicant could show “good and sufficient cause” for asking for an exception to be made in his favour The best proof I can give is that when I applied to the Home Secretary through the Right Hon William Lowther, who was a family friend, for a special permit to see Oscar about reconciling him with his wife I received a letter from the Home Office which ran as follows

HOME OFFICE,

WHITEHALL, S W

10th Sept 1895

DEAR SIR,—I am desired by Sir Matthew Ridley, with reference to your letter to Mr Lowther requesting permission

to visit Mr Oscar Wilde, to inform you that if Mr. Wilde is due for a visit and desires to see you an order would be sent. If, however, you wish for an exceptional visit, it would be advisable for you to write here, stating the nature of the "Matters of most urgent importance" which you say you wish to communicate to him.

I do not think Harris had any "matters of most urgent importance" to discuss with Oscar, at least to judge from his report of the conversation he had with him, and so I cannot imagine on what grounds his order was issued. For a wonder this conversation is mainly rather long answers from Oscar to questions from Harris, Oscar quotes Dante and Henri de Regnier and it represents Oscar in an absolutely false light. He says that Oscar begged him not to repeat anything he said (I presume not even to Ruggles-Brise or to the Home Secretary), that Oscar was "beside himself with dread." Harris remarks, "I ought to have visited him sooner," that "I felt guilty." It was the kind of interview that the merest cub reporter would have had no difficulty whatever in concocting, but it does not show us Harris in the light of a special plenipotentiary from the Home Office.

He winds up his account with another substitution of himself for me. He relates that Oscar had told him that the particular warder in attendance had been very good to him and so, says Harris, while Oscar was being escorted back to his cell, he took "out a banknote and put it under the blotting-paper" that had been provided for the special commissioner. A "banknote" in those days meant a five-pound note. The warder returns and as they are going downstairs together, the warder tells Harris what a fine fellow Wilde is, but curiously enough describes his nature just as Harris describes it, and just as Harris and Shaw want posterity to consider it: weak, soft and woman-like. Harris is delighted with the warder's faulty

psycho-analysis of the character of which Sir Frank Benson has given us a different account and tells the warder that he has left something, as a small token of his regard and esteem, under the blotting-paper for him. The warder is in great alarm and in "a hurried, fear-struck voice" tells him he can accept nothing and that Harris must return and resume immediate possession of his "fiver." This Harris does, but all the same he does not let that "good, honest man, full of the milk of human kindness," go unrewarded, for he hands him down to posterity arm-in-arm with Sir Ruggles-Brise, and in Shakespearean language as the "salt of the English world—better are not to be found on earth." However, I am afraid that he borrowed this incident from one that occurred to me as I was leaving Wandsworth after my special visit to Wilde. The incident is described on page 192 of my *The Real Oscar Wilde*. My offer was, however, only a modest half-crown. I felt I could not do less after the warder had described my friend to me as "the finest gentleman we have ever had inside these walls." He also refused it in "a fear-struck voice," but explained as we got round the corner of the building. "You never know here who may be looking at yer." I glanced back round the corner and noticed watching our departure, a bespectacled, whiskery little man glaring down from a point-of-vantage window. As soon as we had gotten out of his range of observation, the financial transaction was completed to our mutual satisfaction. I think Bosie must have laughed at Harris's story of the warder and the five-pound note, for he wrote me once that it had been his experience at Holloway that a sovereign would make matters all right with any warder. And here we have a warder refusing a whole fiver coyly nestling in a bed of pink blotting paper!

As stated, I consider it useless to deal here with the absurd conversations which Harris describes as having passed between

him and Sir Evelyn on his return as special commissioner from Reading Gaol and again a week later. They are just as probable as if he had described Sir Ruggles-Brise receiving him at the Home Office, standing on his head and gently waving a pair of flowered carpet slippers to and fro. The Chairman has meanwhile made his own inquiries and is sorry to have to report that Oscar's is rather a bad case in the way of conduct; for instance, "he was often late in the morning"! Late, ye gods! When? Where? How? Sir Ruggles-Brise had probably drafted the Home Secretary's warning to the persons of "high standing in the Church and learned professions" that it would be quite useless to submit any petition on Wilde's behalf, but "jumps at" Harris's brilliant suggestion that he should get some distinguished literary men such as Meredith and Hardy to sign a fresh petition and tells Harris that a "dozen literary men" would do the trick, or if Harris could rope in Meredith's signature to such a petition, even less than a dozen would surely bring home the bacon.

Harris forgets that already twice had petitions from literary men on Oscar's behalf failed utterly. There was the one got up in Paris in 1895 by the American poet Stuart Merrill, which received little or no support, and there was the petition engineered by Ross at a time when Harris was hob-nobbing with Kruger in Jo'burg, when a big effort was made to get Wilde released at the end of a year's imprisonment. Certainly Sir Evelyn, who had had to deal with these petitions, would never have said what Harris imputes to him. But Harris seems to have had some wish to "slate" Meredith and represents him as callous to Wilde's sufferings and deaf to Harris's pleadings. This is untrue and unjust. If Harris really ever tried to get up a useless petition, months after the Home Secretary's warning, and did really approach Meredith on the subject, Meredith's refusal to sign—I don't believe Harris ever asked



him—would be prompted by self-depreciation. He once described himself to me in a letter as “an unsuccessful novelist living in a poor cottage” But that he deplored Wilde’s appalling downfall in my presence is shown in the following passage from my *The Real Oscar Wilde* (p. 262), which no doubt is what suggested Harris’s attack

I met him (Meredith) for the first time, just after Wilde’s conviction, and in company with Henry James had a long drive with him. He was monologuing most of the time and mainly about Wilde. He seemed sorry for his fate, but expressed as far as I remember no particular sympathy with him. He had found the words “carnal insanity” to explain Wilde’s aberration, and seemed to like the expression, for he frequently repeated it . . .

He was a disappointed old man and quite mistaken when he thought his name would carry no weight. He may, for all I know, have been one of the distinguished persons whom the Home Secretary had snubbed in advance, and very probably was

Harris, however, reaches his top-note of impudence in connection with his visit to Reading Gaol as Home Office Plenipotentiary, where he states on page 606 of the Appendix that it was his report that “got Lt-Col Isaacson relieved” from the post of Governor of Reading Gaol. At the time of his alleged visit to Wilde in June, 1896, Lt-Col H B Isaacson, marked for promotion, had already been nominated to the governorship of Lewes Prison, of which he took possession on July 1st, 1896. The salary at Reading only ranged from £310 to £350 (by yearly increment), while at Lewes the salary rose from £360 to £450 per annum. Isaacson had gone as far in the prison-governor-career as it was possible to do at Reading and so, being considered a good public servant, was automatically moved to a post with better pay. From Lewes six years later, by which time (with a yearly increment of £15

a year) he could go no farther at Lewes, he was promoted again to Brixton Prison where the salary starts at £500 and rises to £600, when he was again promoted and received the red ribbon of the Prison Service by being appointed Governor of Strangeways Gaol in Manchester, where in 1905 he was drawing as such £700. He died at the very top of this forbidding tree in 1915. I did not like the look of him when I once saw him nosing round the gallows-shed in the courtyard of Reading Gaol and indignantly refused Ross's suggestion that I should go up to him and ask about Oscar; but he was considered by the authorities a competent and trustworthy official and this was shown, in spite of Harris's falsehood, by the eminent success of his grim and repellent career.

There is no record of Harris's visiting Wilde again until April 10th of the following year, but of course he may have done so, though I never heard about it. The visit on April 10th is, however, of special interest—if it ever took place at all—because the whole of the conversation reported is probably invention and because he makes a deliberate statement that on that occasion Oscar told him about *De Profundis* and indeed offered to sell him the manuscript.

With regard to *De Profundis*, though I say it who should not, I do really think that my description of the work as a whole which I gave in my book *The Real Oscar Wilde* (p. 161) is the most apt. Here I wrote "I don't believe that if the whole manuscript, as it stood, had been published, it would have gained a tithe of the universal appreciation which it now enjoys. Its beauties would have been swamped in the unloveliness of the peevish recriminations it contains, which are of no interest to anybody." It occurred to me that the original *De Profundis* might be said to resemble a work written in collaboration by Socrates and his good lady. Ross very wisely has given us the Socratean parts alone,

leaving the Xantippe contributions for a remote posterity to deal with.

Lord Alfred Douglas possesses a keen sense of humour, but he could hardly be expected, after the first shock of disillusionment and indignation at Oscar's reproaches in this letter, to see in it anything amusing or in the least degree palliating this seeming act of treachery. He has told me with his own lips how overwhelmed he was at this totally unexpected blow from the friend whom he had always cherished. If he had been less wounded by the blow, if he had been able to look at the matter from a calmer standpoint, he might have seen the pathetic comicality of poor Wilde's recriminations. He might perhaps have remembered how Charles Dickens, whose vast and charitable sympathy with our poor humanity could detect a condoning risibility in almost every clash between men, had more than a half-century previously burlesqued poor Oscar's outcries against Bosie's fancied ingratitude and his enumeration of his disbursements on his behalf.

In the novel *Nicholas Nickleby*, one of the characters, a Mr Kenwigs, has just received the news that a Mr Lillyvick has just done something which destroys the hopes Kenwigs had based on Lillyvick's obligations to him. He is most indignant.

"The attention," said Mr Kenwigs, looking around with a plaintive air—"the attention that I've shown to that man! The hysters he has ate, and the pints of ale he has drunk in this house——"

If for Kenwigs one puts Oscar Wilde, for oysters, ortolans and for pints of ale, bottles of champagne, one has almost the selfsame text as the complaint in *De Profundis* against Alfred Douglas *vice* Lillyvick.

And better still. One of Oscar's grievances was specifically connected with a pair of sleeve-links, which, it appears, cost £30. Kenwigs had a similar grievance to formulate.

"The presents that have been made to him," said Mr. Kenwigs, reverting to his calamity, "the pipes, the snuff-boxes—a pair of goloshes that cost six-and-six——"

Substitute here "cigarettes" for "pipes" and the "sleeve-links" for the "goloshes" and there you have the whole thing caricatured and made laughable, with any sting taken out of it, fifty or sixty years previously

But a little reflection on the part of Bosie admitting that his affection for, and consequently sympathetic comprehension of his fallen friend, which we have neither reason nor right to doubt, were genuine and sincere, might have afforded him the ready and obvious explanation why Xantippean, not to say Kenwigsian, invective and inculcation disfigure the first part of this lofty Epistola. When, after the arrival of Major Nelson as Governor of Reading Gaol, and when C 33 was accorded somewhat humaner treatment—the credit for which Frank Harris has the singular effrontery to claim for himself—poor Wilde was in a mental condition which gave those who saw him at the time (I can declare this, as I was one of those referred to) every reason for fearing that long before the six months which his sentence still had to run had elapsed, he would be hopelessly insane. The authorities did not care to face such an eventuality, all the less because even in high places it was felt that Wilde's sentence had been far too severe—that "hanging judge," Sir Henry Hawkins himself, had criticized Justice Wills's severity and had stated that twelve months' imprisonment would have been a fully adequate retribution—and to avoid the disgrace of having tortured to death or madness a genius, who was later to be described as "one of the most brilliantly gifted men that England ever produced"—and various modifications of the prison régime—branded as iniquitous in the House of Commons by the Home Secretary, Sir Matthew White Ridley himself—were authorized for the benefit of C 33. But when Oscar Wilde, at

last furnished with writing materials, sat down to the trestle-table which had been rigged up for him in the 3rd cell of the 3rd gallery of the C. section of Reading Gaol, he was still smarting from the Isaacson rods. The very writing of the first few pages of the famous manuscript shows this, and in its way is as eloquent as is the well-known signature of Guido Fawkes after another species of torturers had had their will of him in 1605. He would be in a condition not far removed from that "chattering monkey rage" which has been attributed to him. He would be filled with bitterness, bubbling with grievance and really irresponsible for what he was writing. And all the more would he be prompted to inveigh against the person he was addressing, because he knew that no recriminations against the prison régime from which he had so suffered would be allowed to pass by the Governor to whom every day his manuscript was carried for inspection by a warder. Under severe mental or physical torture we poor mortals revert to pure animality and turn with tooth and claw, talon and hoof, on anyone who comes near us, even when we know that he is trying to be good, to assuage. Surely Bosie, moving in the exalted social circles where gout is endemic. surely also he must at times have endeavoured to help and relieve some wounded and suffering pet—dog, a cat, even a horse, suave and benign amongst created things! *Tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner*

Little by little, slowly but surely, under the influence of the more humane treatment which he now received, the poor prisoner recovered his senses and began to take a kindlier view of occurrences the remembrance of which till then in his morbid condition had so exasperated him. He began to come back to his real nature, to his native kindness, comprehension and tolerance. His very manuscript shows the gradually increasing serenity of his mind, the appeasement of his tortured nerves. Day by day this serenity, this appeasement produced

their beneficent effect The man awoke from despair to hope. A glimmer of dawn began to show itself on the horizon and in the blackest of nights came the promise of day. The joy of life progressively flickered within him into a flame which, hour by hour, grew brighter and more comforting. The mere pleasure of writing, of artistic creation, helped greatly towards this transformation As he wrote to Robert Ross on April 1st, 1897, his greatest reason for gratitude was that Major Nelson had given him permission to write as much and as often as he pleased He said that this permission to express himself had given him new life, for that it is by expression alone that the artist lives; and he definitely states here that thanks to being allowed to write he has largely purged his soul of much of the bitterness which had accumulated in his heart

The two delightful letters to Ross of April 1st and April 6th show even better than the latter parts (the Socratean contribution) of *De Profundis* how entirely he had recovered his real, his fine personality, that particular charm and grace for which I can find in no language a correcter and more precise definition than in the German word, *Leutseligkeit*, which German writers usually reserve for describing the kindly bearing of high persons towards their admitted inferiors It is often used in speaking of a prince or monarch or high overlord—*ein leutseliger Herr*—in his bearings towards and conversation with people who are not his equals The word conveys not the faintest suggestion of condescension. For this reason it is not translatable into French by *mansuétude*, nor into English by urbanity The carriage of the urbane Louis XIV was often full of mansuetude, but from it condescension was never wanting Oscar Wilde was "*ein leutseliger Herr*," *sans plus*

This letter to Ross dated from Reading Gaol, April 1st, is of special interest because it definitely and finally establishes

the right of Robert Baldwin Ross, which after Wilde's death was fiercely contested, to act as Oscar Wilde's literary executor. "I want you," he writes, "to be my literary executor in case of my death, and to have complete control of my plays, books and papers" With regard to the manuscript itself of the letter which was afterwards called *De Profundis*, he is equally definite. "Well," he adds, "if you are my literary executor, you must be in possession of the only document that gives any explanation of my extraordinary behaviour" Ross was therefore most clearly entitled to the possession and disposal of the "Epistola, in Carcere et Vinculis," but I am not at all sure in my mind that Douglas, as he claims, is not entitled to the actual manuscript of the letter The paper on which it was written, as it is a letter that was addressed to him, is by law his property As this manuscript must be worth a huge sum—I have heard it valued at over 100,000 dollars—one can understand that he should wish to have it Of course at the time it was written neither Wilde nor Ross had any idea whatever of the ulterior value of the letter as an autograph manuscript, but that makes it only the more obvious that it was the original manuscript that was to have been sent to Douglas I know that were I sitting as a jurymen in *Douglas v The British Museum* in a claim by Bosie for the actual manuscript of *De Profundis*, I should have no hesitation whatever in casting my vote for the plaintiff On the other hand, as Bosie has frequently declared that had this manuscript come into his hands after it had been copied, he, not having any inkling of its ultimate value, would most probably have pitched it into the fire it seems just as well that Ross did not carry out Wilde's original intention The manuscript will therefore remain in the archives of the British Museum till 1960, and since the whole of it has now been published and there will then be no curiosity as to the parts hitherto suppressed, probably undisturbed except by graphologists What

## WHERE "FAKIR" BOLTS

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its eventual determination may be, who shall say? Haply to furnish some understudy to Macaulay's New Zealander with papillotes for his smiling gin. Well may she smile with one hundred "grand" curl papers!



## CHAPTER XV

### FRANK HARRIS AND *DE PROFUNDIS*

THE two letters from Oscar Wilde to Ross which are referred to in the preceding chapter, the letters dated April 1st and 6th, 1897, respectively afford the clearest documentary evidence that where Harris in the *Life and Confessions* (Vol II, pp 356 to 362) reports the interview he had with Oscar Wilde in April, 1897, in which Wilde told him he was writing the book that was afterwards called *De Profundis*, and begged him to publish it in the *Saturday Review*, he is lying with even more than his usual impudence

In this conversation, Frank Harris tells us, Wilde told him that he was going to write the history of his past, that it is the book of pity and of love—"a terrible book"—that he is writing now

In a note on this page 360 Harris gives the title of this book: *De Profundis*

He goes on to say that Oscar said he would like him to publish it in the *Saturday*, that he would like it to appear there

Harris says that he will be delighted to publish it and to pay Wilde much more than what he was paying Bernard Shaw

Wilde then says he knows that it will be all right about the "copy-money" (as Dr Johnson used to call it) and promises to send Harris the book as soon as he has finished it

Every word of this conversation is a lie

The letter to Ross dated April 1st begins by telling him the *De Profundis* manuscript is being sent him from the gaol under another cover. Consequently it had been completed before

April 1st. As a matter of fact, the manuscript had not been forwarded but was lying packed up for the post in Major Nelson's office. Wilde had sent off one letter and was not entitled to send another. The April 6th letter to Ross was doubtless smuggled out of the prison by the friendly Martin. The precious manuscript was handed back to C 33 on the day he left Reading Gaol five weeks later and then came into Ross's hands.

In this letter of April 6th, Wilde tells Ross that he is expecting Frank Harris's visit on the following Saturday, that is to say on April 10th, 1897.

Accordingly at the time of Harris's visit the *De Profundis* manuscript had been completely finished and revised.

There is no possible doubt as to the date on which this visit took place. Harris tells us it was months after Major Nelson's appointment as Governor and that he found Wilde in wonderful health and spirits, "better than I had ever seen him."

The whole conversation which he reports as having taken place on April 10th is as much a fabrication as the lies about *De Profundis*. The part where he says that Wilde, in praising his dead mother, brought up the wretched story about the Dublin scandal in 1864, is another cruel lie. Wilde would sooner have had his tongue torn from its roots than have referred to this story. Harris invents this passage to justify himself for his abominable cruelty towards his dead friend in the hideous and treacherous first chapter of his book. Under no conceivable circumstances would Wilde have discussed his mother and father during an interview under the degrading circumstances and in the degrading surroundings of a prison interview in the presence of a warder. I am better qualified to consider Harris's report of Wilde's remarks about Lady Wilde and his little sister, Isola, as concoctions because he borrows from my books the phrases he puts into Wilde's mouth. He does worse. He makes Wilde quote as his mother's dying

words the remark she made when she had been informed on May 25th, 1895, that Oscar had been convicted and sent to prison "May prison help him" These words were told me at the time and had years later been reported by me. They had never reached Wilde's ears, because I had never repeated them to him. Harris not only "lifted" them from page 77 of my *Unhappy Friendship* but in a note commenting on the remark he attributes to Oscar, gives the gist of my comparison between the harshness practised in England towards prisoners and the greater humaneness that obtains in France, where even a condemned murderer would be allowed to visit his mother on her death-bed

Harris's impudence in his fabrications is further exhibited in this concocted conversation by the fact that he gives, as spoken to him on that occasion, the passage in Wilde's letter to Ross of April 6th in which he gives a list of books which he would like his friends to get for him against his release "I have a horror myself," he writes, "of going out into the world without a single book of my own" He then gives Ross a list of "titles" beginning with Flaubert and ending with Goethe This Harris copies word for word in the exact sequence of the names, but with his usual contempt for his dupes, his readers, makes Oscar add to this list the Song of Solomon, Job and "of course" the Gospels It never occurred to him that Wilde would certainly not ask for a Bible, the one book that is found in every prisoner's cell in England

Wilde had asked Ross to see that these books should be waiting for him on his release. Harris makes out Wilde asked him for them to be sent to him to the prison where he had only five weeks longer to remain Harris of course showed himself the generous benefactor and friend and promises to get him the library in question Here was an opportunity not to be missed for Harris once more to posture as Wilde's benefactor. As a matter of fact such books as reached Oscar in Reading

Gaol, which he was allowed to receive on condition they were left behind on his release, were provided by Robert Ross. "The very books in my cell," writes Oscar to Bosie, "are paid for by Robbie out of his pocket-money."

In the Appendix to the 1918 edition of his book (p 577), under the heading "My Coldness Towards Wilde in 1897," Harris reverts to this imaginary conversation in Reading Gaol of April 10th, 1897, repeating and expanding his fabrications. Here he tells us that on that occasion Wilde told him he was writing the book afterwards known as *De Profundis* and wanted to know if he, Harris, would care to publish it in the *Saturday Review*; that he answered that he would be delighted to do so and would pay him for it "not only at the rate I paid Bernard Shaw," but also give him a share of the profits from the extra sales of his weekly which might result from this publication. This is a different offer from the one he reports in the book itself, but let that pass. He adds the bare-faced lie "He promised to send me the book *De Profundis* as soon as it was written." He goes on to say that just before Wilde's release, he was called on by Mr More Adey who came to offer him the manuscript of *De Profundis*, and is described as bargaining for a sum down for its sale. This appendix note is so obviously a misrepresentation of what occurred that it is not worth while to analyse it. It seems to have been written by Harris first to establish the monstrous suggestion that Wilde asked him to buy his letter to Bosie for publication in a London weekly, and secondly to enable him to introduce a filthy innuendo against Wilde in the form of a play on the word *arrière* in the Gallicism "*une arrière-pensée*." When this note was written and published Ross was dead and so could not expose the lies about *De Profundis*, while More Adey, having been for some time past under restraint in a mental home, was equally incapable of making any protest against Harris's version of their interview. For I think that there was a meeting between

Harris and More Adey and that the object of Adey's business call was to offer to sell Harris some of Wilde's prison writings but not the letter to Bosie, of which nobody knew anything except Major Nelson, Robert Ross and Mrs Marshall's type-writing employee—not even Lord Alfred Douglas himself—till eight years later For directly after Wilde had finished his *Epistola* towards the end of March, 1897, he at once set to work on other compositions What these were nobody knew except Major Nelson—essays possibly, or perhaps fairy-tales, or maybe a prose version of what was afterwards *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* That Wilde was continuously employed in literary labour during the last six weeks of his imprisonment—that is to say after *De Profundis* had been finished and was packed up for the post but not allowed to be forwarded—was told me by Mr Thomas Martin, the warder who during these six weeks was in charge of C 3 3 May I quote the following extract from my book *Twenty Years in Paris* which was published in 1905

Some of my correspondents have expressed the doubt that *De Profundis* was written in prison at all I presume this doubt arises from the supposition that Oscar Wilde would have had no time nor opportunity to write To an ordinary prisoner, indeed, such an opportunity would have been wanting But after his illness, as we know, he was allowed to occupy himself in his cell with study and writing A warder told me that Mr Wilde was always writing towards the end of his time

"Whilst in prison he wrote and wrote, and what he wrote about I never knew, for I always neglected to ask him I know that he always had a big book in his cell—for all the world like a grocer's ledger—and in it he kept writing and writing The Chief Warder took it to the Governor's office every morning, and after the Governor had glanced over it, the prisoner's book was taken back to the cell again."

It must have been in this book that *De Profundis* was originally written The gods have no other ironies than these, and never another book might serve the artist for the composition of his supremest work of art than a grocer's ledger

If the conversation of April 10th ever took place at all in Reading Gaol and Wilde did ask Harris if he would publish what he was writing, he must obviously have referred to what was being written in that grocer's ledger, being under the erroneous impression that he would be allowed to take this manuscript with him when he left the prison; and equally obvious is it that it was the compositions in this grocery ledger that More Adey was detailed to go and offer to Harris at the *Saturday Review* office. At that time and until the moment of his leaving gaol, Wilde would imagine he would be left in possession of his work. But if he was allowed by prison regulations to take away with him the manuscript of *De Profundis* because that was a letter addressed to a third party, these same regulations debarred him from the ownership and disposal of any other fruits of his labour. These remained as much the property of the Crown as the handfuls of oakum which C 3.2. on one side of him and C 3 4 on the other side had been tearing with bleeding nails from tarry chunks of rope. His time, his labour, the materials he had used were the property of the Crown and might not be diverted.

So poor More Adey had really nothing to sell, nor Harris anything to buy on the occasion when the latter made his kindly reference to Wilde's *arrière-pensée*.

In his *Autobiography*, in the poignant account of his life in gaol, Lord Alfred Douglas relates how the same strict rule was applied to him at Wormwood Scrubs when on his discharge he wanted to take away with him a penny copybook, in which with the assistance of St Anthony of Padua and St Thomas Aquinas in their composition, he had written a sequence of seventeen sonnets which were afterwards published in the *London Mercury* and later by Martin Secker, under the title of *In Excelsis*. The penny copybook, the prison pencil, and the convict's time being the property of the Crown, Douglas was not allowed to take the copybook surcharged

with Government graphite away with him and though he twice petitioned the Home Office to return him this manuscript was never able to regain possession of it. Fortunately for the delight of the Sky-children he had become aware of this regulation a week before he left the Scrubs and, as he says, memorized the sonnets To-day, July 3rd, 1936, the MS of these sonnets is still at the Home Office, and the last time I saw Douglas he was thinking of making a fresh application for it

If the preceding pages have not fully satisfied the reader that Harris's account of his conversation with Wilde in Reading Gaol on Saturday, April 10th, is pure invention he may be reminded that not a single soul, except Robert Ross, and not excepting Lord Alfred, knew anything about the book that Wilde had been writing in prison, which was in the form of a letter to "Bosie," until 1905, when Dr Max Meyerfeld published in Germany the selected extracts to which the name of *De Profundis* was given, that Harris never mentioned to his friend, Alfred Douglas, that Wilde had told him he had been able to write in prison a "book of pity and of love" and that accordingly Douglas was unaware that Wilde "had left behind him an unpublished manuscript of any sort" until he had been round to Ryder Street to question Robert Ross, that the statement that Wilde asked him, Harris, to publish a document which would instantaneously have ruined any periodical in the way of legal costs and damages in a civil suit and most probably would have landed author and editor in the dock for criminal libel, really shows on the part of Harris a too impudent contempt for the credulity of the public, that it is equally impossible to believe that in the subsequent conversation with More Adey, nothing of the character of the work offered transpired so that he, Harris, wishes us to believe that he never asked a single question as to its nature but restricted himself alone to chaffering about the mode of payment, all this ought to dispel any doubt as to the inauthenticity of the interview.

Then comes the fact that after Wilde's release a few weeks later Harris, who till then had been on the friendliest terms with him, developed that "coldness towards Oscar in 1897," which he explains and tries to justify in his note on pages 577 and 578 of the Appendix in the second volume of his *Life and Confessions*, and spoke about his whilom friend in such a way that in a letter dated from Naples, October 19th, 1897, Oscar writes to Leonard Smithers à propos of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*: "Frank Harris has been so disagreeable towards me and about me, that I don't think that any negotiations with him are possible." That he was in no peevish humour, indeed in one of his genial moods, when he wrote this is shown by what he goes on to say, namely that he would recommend that the ballad should be offered to *Reynolds's Newspaper*—"which is bought by the criminal classes to which I now belong—so that I should be read by my equals—a novel experience for me." Sheer badinage!

I think this shows that not only was there an interview between Wilde and Harris on April 10th, afterwards so falsely reported by Harris, but that something occurred then and there which annoyed Harris and aroused his malice. He may have wanted Wilde to write something for the *Saturday Review*, possibly his prison experiences, or to grant him some such "interview" on the same, for which the American reporter on his release offered Wilde £1,000, to be rebuffed with the remark that he, Wilde, "could not understand how anybody could make such an offer to a gentleman," and that Wilde may have refused, possibly in somewhat similar reprobation.

In this same note to the appendix Harris adds to the imaginary conversation which he reports in the text of the book the statement that on the same occasion he proposed to Wilde to take him on a driving-tour through France after his release and says that Wilde "jumped at the idea, said nothing would please him better." This is obviously untrue because within a month



of his leaving gaol—the exact date of the letter is June 13th, 1897—Wilde wrote. “I am told also that you are hurt because I did not go on the driving-tour with you. You should understand that in telling you it was impossible for me to do so, I was thinking as much of *you* as of myself” He goes on to give Harris his reasons for refusing the offer, his total lack of a reserve of nervous energy, one effect of which was that he is “utterly exhausted” after a meeting with a friend, or after writing a letter of more than a few lines, or even after reading any book with a direct appeal to his intellect. He says that had he gone on the driving-tour with Harris “where we would have been of necessity in immediate contact with each other from dawn to sunset,” he would have been forced to break off the tour within a day or two by a nervous collapse.

This is probably only in other words the objection that Wilde had raised when Harris mooted his proposal during the interview in Reading Gaol and it is probably because Wilde did *not* “jump at the idea” nor say that “nothing would please him better” that Harris left the prison in a temper and started abusing him to all and sundry, greatly distressing Wilde thereby.

This delightful letter of June 13th—one of the best things in Harris’s book—was the second that Wilde wrote after his release to Frank Harris and seems to have been prompted by the facts that Harris had not acknowledged the receipt of the first and that meanwhile Wilde had heard that Harris was speaking badly of him. Harris appends a note to Wilde’s complaint that he had not even acknowledged the receipt of the first letter, saying that it was merely an acknowledgement of a cheque and some clothes which Harris asserts he sent him. He adds that he saw nothing in this note to answer and that Wilde had made no reference to the proposed driving-tour. Five pages farther on in the appendix, i.e. on page 583, he gives the text of a note from Wilde which he describes as the one

that Wilde wrote him from Dieppe directly after his release, which he had not thought worth answering especially as there was nothing in it about the driving-tour. My opinion is that this note is a forgery and a fabrication and existed only in Harris's mind and one wonders at the man's cynical impudence in printing it. When he concocted it as a proof of his generosity towards Wilde he had forgotten the note he had appended to the letter from Wilde of June 13, for the third paragraph of this first communication represents Wilde as writing "About our tour—later on let us think about it."

The letter is obviously fabricated. He represents Wilde as thanking him for "the lovely clothes and the generous cheque." Can anyone who had the most casual acquaintance with Wilde imagine him writing those words? And who, after reading Harris's book, will believe that he ever sent him any clothes and will not be more than sceptical about the "generous cheque"? That Harris sent Wilde money on his release is less easy to disprove than many of the imaginary largesses which throughout the two volumes he describes himself as showering on him, but why should Harris send a "generous cheque" to Wilde when, as he was well aware, his friend left prison with £800 to his credit at the bank, and who, knowing Wilde, would believe that he would accept a money-gift under such circumstances or write to acknowledge it in the words attributed to his pen? The allegation as to the "lovely clothes" is disproved not only by the absurdity of the fabrication, but also by Harris's contradictions in the book and its appendix on the subject.

How obviously, can be ascertained from a book which appeared after my manuscript had left my hands. I refer to Mr. Hugh Kingsmill's most interesting *Frank Harris*, published by Jonathan Cape in the late spring of 1932, a finely written study of the man with whom Mr. Kingsmill had for years been acquainted and for whom he also, though painfully aware of Harris's many shortcomings, has always entertained that

mysterious feeling of sympathy with which Frank Harris, the spell-binder, inspired all those who came into contact with him. On page 102 of this book Mr Kingsmill reveals what actually did occur between Frank Harris and Oscar Wilde at their last interview in Reading Gaol in April, 1897. It shows us that the "generous cheque" was as unsubstantial as the "lovely clothes," and that the note from Wilde which Harris had the impudence to print in the Appendix of his book is a forgery. What happened, according to Mr Kingsmill, who backs his statement with an extract from a letter from Wilde to More Adey, was this

During the interview Harris told Wilde that he had made £20,000 by his operations in South Africa and that it was his intention to present a sum of £500 to him. Mr Kingsmill adds that on hearing this offer Wilde broke down. Let Mr Kingsmill relate the sordid sequel

" 'I was very deeply moved at his generous present,' he says in the account which he sent to his friend, More Adey, 'and made no attempt to conceal by feelings, which were indeed beyond my control.' A day or two later, Wilde continues, Harris sent him a message expressing his regret at being unable to give him the promised cheque. 'Frank Harris,' Wilde comments, 'has no feelings. It is the secret of his success. Just as the fact that he thinks other people have none either is the secret of the failure that lies in wait for him somewhere on the way of life.' "

" 'I loathe the promise makers,' continues Wilde. 'I could be humble and grateful to a beggar who gave me half of the crust out of his wallet, but the rich, the ostentatious, the false who ask one to a rich banquet and then when one is hungry and in want shut the door of house and heart against one and tell one to go elsewhere—I have nothing but contempt for them. The Frank Harris of life are a dreadful type. I hope to see no more of them.' "

So much for the generous cheque and Wilde's alleged letter of thanks for the same.

At the beginning of Chapter XIX (Vol. II, p 363) Harris states that not long before Wilde's release, one of his intimate friends told him, Harris, that Wilde was destitute and begged him to provide him with some clothes. The only intimate friends who knew anything of Wilde's circumstances at the time were Robert Ross, More Adey and myself, and it was certainly none of us three who made such an appeal, mendacious and unwarranted as it was. Wilde, we knew, had an ample sum to look forward to on his discharge apart from which his wife was in a position to save her husband from such eleemosynary humiliation.

By the time Harris came to write the note "My Coldness Towards Oscar in 1897" (Appendix, Vol II, p 577), to which reference has been made, he had forgotten what he had written in Chapter XIX and informs his readers that a week or two after his interview with the prisoner in Reading Gaol, Wilde asked him to procure him some clothes. It is quite possible that during the interview of April 10th the question of how Wilde would be provided as regards wardrobe on leaving prison may have been mooted by Harris, who was not without generous impulses, but it is quite certain that in this case Wilde would have informed him that his clothes for his re-entry into the world had already been arranged for by Robert Ross. Only a week or two before this interview took place he had told "Bosie" in the letter which was afterwards called *De Profundis* that Ross was to be the provider. "The very books in my cell," he writes (p 108 of the abridged edition), "are paid for by — out of his pocket-money, from the same source are to come clothes for me when released."

This is the passage as edited by Ross, who put a dash in the place of "Robbie." At the time Harris concocted his *Life and Confessions*, he only had the abridged *De Profundis*, and saw

here an opportunity to substitute himself for Ross. One of the slogans of Harris's battle with life was always: "*Ôte-toi de là que je m'y mette.*" (You, get out of there, so that I may have your place) and here he saw an opportunity for self-glorification by substituting himself for Ross, in the matter of the clothes, just as he substituted himself for me in his account of how he tried to get Wilde out of the country before his last trial

After Ross's death, when the Appendix was added to the 1918 edition of his book, he prints what he calls "The Unpublished Portion of *De Profundis*," in which he includes the whole passage, from the published *De Profundis* which speaks of Wilde's gratitude towards the few friends who had been kind to him in prison and mentions that Robbie had provided him with books and was going to provide him with clothes. To the word "Robbie" Harris puts an asterisk which indicates a note at the bottom of this page (p 573), in which he explains that it was he and not Robbie, who supplied the clothes, as proved he says by the letter of thanks from Wilde (the "lovely clothes and generous cheque" letter) which he prints on page 583

His statement, by the way, that a week or two after his visit on April 10th, he received a letter from Wilde begging for the clothes is obviously untrue. Wilde was only allowed to send out one letter every three months and though it is clear that more than one additional letter was smuggled out of the prison on his behalf—for instance the letter to Ross of April 6th following on the authorized quarterly letter of April 1st—it is also clear that Wilde would not have had recourse to this extremely risky method of communication to ask Harris for something which he did not require, as it had been provided for by another

It is equally perfectly certain that had Harris provided the clothes, Ross, who had already suppressed his own name in

Wilde's reference to them in *De Profundis*, would not have allowed edition after edition of this book to appear without a note on page 108 to give the credit of the largesse to Harris, the real donor.

Ross at that time was as modest and self-effacing as Harris was the reverse. Throughout *De Profundis* all reference to himself is so edited as to make it impossible to identify the person of whom Wilde is writing. I have been often congratulated by correspondents on having written Wilde every twelve weeks during his imprisonment that "little budget of literary news" which he speaks of with such appreciation and more than once it is I who am supposed to be the friend who attended his appearance at the Bankruptcy Court for the sole purpose of raising my hat to him as, handcuffed and an object of public contumely, he passed through the jeering crowd in the "long, dreary corridor," about whom he writes so eloquently in praise on pages 25 and 26 of his *Epistola*. It has been useless for me to point out that the Bankruptcy Court is the very last place in London that I should be likely to attend of my own free will.

Harris's story about having sent clothes to Wilde to wear on his discharge can only be believed by those who believe a story *quia absurdum*. This story reminds me always of one written by a much abler romancer than himself, the Story of the Foolish King and the Rogue Tailors, by a certain Hans Andersen, and I like to think of myself as the shrewd, little girl who detected and proclaimed the imposture. I used to think as a proof that Bernard Shaw never read the book which he praised so highly that surely when he came to Chapter XIX and read how Harris by a cash-payment had induced a fashionable West-End tailor to make these clothes, these "lovely clothes" for Wilde, he must surely have exclaimed "This will never do"; but when I had read Frank Harris's *Life of Shaw* and Shaw's own additions to that book, and had thus learned of George's

long unfamiliarity with the sartorial gent, it seemed to me that he might possibly have been another of the dupes whose eyes were opened by the shrewd, little girl. Surely even a man who knew nothing about tailors or tailoring would not have swallowed the fable that a fashionable West-End tailor had agreed to make and actually did make and deliver one or more suits of "lovely clothes" without having had any opportunity of taking fresh measurements, for a client who having been kept on the shortest rations and under physique-wracking conditions in an English gaol for two years was known by Harris's *de visu*, and by public report, to have lost nearly three stone in weight, who entering prison bulky and obese was about to issue forth from it the very different kind of physical man that Nature had always intended him to be. No wonder the tailor refused to make clothes under these conditions. There's not a tailor in Petticoat Lane who would have attempted the job, and a fashionable West-End man such as Wilde had been accustomed to employ. <sup>1</sup> Harris, again on self-glorification bent, suggests that the tailor objected to working for Wilde because Wilde was a disgraced person but that "the tradesman soul" readily yielded to the offer of a cash payment!

Can anyone imagine Wilde agreeing to wear "lovely clothes" made in this way? Can anyone imagine what he would have looked like arrayed in garments made for a man weighing from thirty to forty pounds more than himself? Would anyone believe that a writer of Harris's standing could have the effrontery to tell such a story and to dupe not only the phantom crowd whom the Rogue Tailors bemused, but a very shrewd, big man like George Bernard Shaw?

The unblushing mendacity of Harris in his note on his coldness to Wilde in 1897 is further exhibited by his comment on Wilde's beautiful letter to him from Dieppe, dated June 13th, 1897, where he says that on receipt of it he replied at once in the friendliest way and said he would be delighted if he

could do anything further for him. This was in June In October of that same year—it will be remembered—Wilde wrote to Smithers to complain of Harris's conduct towards and about him.

In the concluding paragraph of this note (p 583) he says that in the next letter of Wilde's which he kept, Wilde shamelessly begs from him He represents him as asking for "even £5 "



## CHAPTER XVI

### HARRIS'S FALSETTO TOP-NOTE

OSCAR WILDE was certainly not dressed in any "lovely clothes" when I first saw him after his release from gaol, at Dieppe in June, 1897. Indeed he looked untidy. The only reference he made to Frank Harris during the three days I spent with him in Berneval was to say that the proposed driving-tour might have been pleasant, but that he felt physically unfit to accept Harris's invitation. Now, although I am convinced that Harris's secret purpose was to get at first-hand and in enormous details materials for some future publication on Wilde's prison experiences and his comments thereupon, for the merest abridgement of which the famous "American reporter" had been prepared to pay Wilde £1,000 at the prison-gates, I say it is a thousand pities that Wilde did not accept this offer. It would have saved him from the disorder and recklessness of his life at Berneval, the dissipation almost to the last penny of his resources and, best of all, from being wooed back into that horrible brotherhood on which he had hoped and striven to turn his back for ever. An incident occurred there, which at the time impressed me not at all, but which under the blinding light that has since been shed on the character and *morale* of the other actor in this episode, leaves me no room for doubt that it was at Berneval that a deliberate attempt was made to drag Wilde back into Malebolge. This remembrance and a fact that has recently transpired, have entirely modified my former views on Wilde's anxious flight to Naples in October of that year, while the publication of his letters from Berneval to

"Bosie" prove that the love that drew him there was most emphatically not the "love that dare not speak its name" but pure and deep affection

"The fact that has recently transpired" issues from a letter written to Wilde's latest biographer, M Léon Lemonnier, by the Berneval village schoolmaster, M Détoisien, who at M. Lemonnier's solicitation, made very careful inquiries and informs his correspondent, amongst other things, that the reason of Wilde's hurried departure from Berneval was because he had heard that "he was about to receive notification of an order of expulsion" This is backed up by the fact that the Sub-Prefect at Dieppe had, to my knowledge, warned "the *proscrit*" that any irregularity of conduct on his part would lead to his immediate expulsion from French territory *par ordre administratif* M Détoisien proceeds "Warned in time he went to a farmer, M Marcel Bary, and got him to drive him to Dieppe railway station, where he took the train for . I don't know where "

Wilde's "irregularities of conduct" would of course be nothing more than friendly and doubtless innocent advances when his utter loneliness urged him to seek human contacts, but these would be malevolently commented upon in the village and as malevolently reported to the Sub-Prefecture No doubt, however, the re-initiation may have tinged and tainted Wilde's perfectly innocent friendliness in such a way as to prompt malevolence, and it is therefore the "friend" to whom I have referred above as the other actor in the incident in question who was responsible for the collapse of Wilde's good resolutions and the utter failure of his attempt to begin a new life full of resignation and high endeavour at Berneval It also explains why, when he was obliged to get out of France as quickly as possible, he took refuge abroad. It is pretty obvious that the warning was issued for no other purpose than to get rid of an undesirable person whose funds were rapidly running out, as

quickly as possible, and that very probably an *ordre administratif* would never have been issued, for in January of the next year Wilde was back in Paris

Harris, disappointed in getting neither prison manuscripts nor oral prison reminiscences from Oscar Wilde, developed that "coldness" towards him which he describes in his appendix (and if ever an operation for appendicitis were expedient and necessary it is here) and relies for informing his readers about Wilde's four-months' life there and the awful fight between the powers of evil and the out-manned, out-manceuvred and out-generalled angels of the light that then and there took place over an immortal soul, on the little book *Oscar Wilde: In Memoriam* reprinted from two articles by André Gide, whence Harris plagiarized the Wilde anecdotes which Henry D. Davray so clumsily camouflaged in the French version

Harris tells us that Gide had called on Wilde at Berneval almost directly after his arrival there. This would therefore be at the end of May, or say the first few days in June, 1897, as Gide tells us he found Wilde living in the two best rooms in the Hôtel de la Plage. When I visited Wilde early in July, he had already left the hotel and was installed in the Villa Bourgeat (now known as "Les Ormeaux"). But Gide reports Wilde as telling him of how he had entertained the village school children to a grande fête, *un grand dîner* in celebration of Queen Victoria's Jubilee. Now here Gide is evidently confused, for the Jubilee festivities in Dieppe took place on the day of the Jubilee, June 22nd, 1897, and Wilde's two school-treats were given, the first on June 27th and the second a week or so later. M. Détoisien gives the menu: "strawberries and cream, biscuits, jam, tea, and says that Wilde himself waited on the children. He is careful specially to set on record that only boys were invited on either occasion and that it was to boys alone that before his departure presents of musical instruments were made by him. It is significant that that

should be remembered after thirty-five years! It is clear therefore that Gide's visit took place not "almost as soon as Wilde had arrived in Berneval" but at least six weeks later. However, his account furnished Harris with plenty of good "copy"; anecdotes to be cited as having been told in exactly the same words, years previously, by Wilde to him, Harris, and notably Wilde's famous remark to Gide that he had put only his talent into his books but his genius into his life. This last aphorism Harris duly quotes as having been made to him.

Harris takes the opportunity here of "throwing into my garden," as the French say, one of several stones, with which he recompenses me for having furnished him with so much gratuitous material for his compilation. He is discussing on page 411 what was Oscar's condition, mental and physical, after he was released from Reading Gaol and goes on to say that "all who knew him really"—himself, Turner, Adey, Douglas and Ross—all concurred in pronouncing him in splendid health. My own name is carefully omitted. Yet when he was concocting his faithful chronicle in his secluded laboratory in Onteora Park in the Catskills in 1915, he has my *Unhappy Friendship* amongst his ingredients and on pages 232, 233 and 234 there could have found a careful study of Wilde's condition both mental and physical after his release.

Neither Douglas nor he, Harris, saw anything of him at the time and neither Ross, nor More Adey, nor Turner gave any record of his condition.

After our separation at Berneval, my contacts with Wilde were rare and with long intervening periods. I had thought him unwise in going to live in Naples with Bosie and had said so. If I had known of the way he was scared away from France by the threat of an *ordre administratif*, but especially if I had known how, though he never once revealed it, he had kept his friendship for Lord Alfred Douglas warm in his bosom, and more particularly still, if I had known of the beautiful

and pathetic letter of the 7th of September (1897), in which Wilde writes to Douglas that he feels that his only chance of ever again creating beautiful works of art is to be back with him, that it was not so formerly but that at present it is different and that it is in Bosie's power to re-create in him the energy and that feeling of joyous power on which art depends; if, I say, I had known all this, I should not have even commented in the mild way I did about the flight to Naples and so should have saved myself the cruel letter of reproach which Oscar wrote me from Posilippo and his subsequent partial estrangement from me. My accounts of his life after Berneval would then have been written here also not from report and documentation, but like those covering the preceding fourteen years of our friendship from direct and close observation. The literary alchemist, then, at Onteora Park would not have been thrown on the sole resources of his malicious imagination for the concluding hundred and thirty pages of his "faithful chronicle." Not that he would have been without documentary evidence if it had suited his purpose to avail himself of it, had his desire been really to tell the truth. For instance, the reports of the Ransome and Douglas trial would have enlightened him on the real cause of the separation of the two friends at Naples, nor could he honestly have helped to pillory Douglas for having abandoned Wilde penniless there, which is the exact opposite of the truth. When Douglas was forced to leave him by his parents, he furnished Wilde with £200 besides paying the rent of the villa in advance.

Harris's malicious invention displays itself at once. He is describing a luncheon-party where Wilde is the guest of Mrs. John Strange Winter and he makes Oscar remark to his hostess—as an exemplification of his genial and kindly humour—that she had been sadly overcharged and cheated when she told the guests with housewifely pride and glee that the red wine they had been drinking only cost her twelve cents the litre. Farther

on he is relating how Oscar on being introduced to Madame de Bovet, who was very far from being good-looking, answered that lady's question whether he did not consider her the plainest woman in France, by a deep bow and a courteous smile with the remark that she was the ugliest woman in the world! I wonder if these are two of the specimens of Wilde's talk of which Robert Ross wrote how admirably Harris in his biography had presented the spirit and manner of Oscar's conversation

Ross, I may say here, has singularly descended in my esteem, the high esteem in which I held him when I dedicated my book to him in 1902, and in my biography committed those "gallant exaggerations" about him to which he refers in the preface to *De Profundis*, or when I signed and contributed to the Ross Testimonial. Long before his death I had struck him off my visiting list, not so much for what transpired at his foolish and abortive prosecution of Alfred Douglas, but because something he said to me in his rooms off Piccadilly on the very last occasion when I saw him had given me "furiously to think". His eulogy of Harris's malicious fabrication, which has only recently come beneath my eyes, tends to confirm me in what I then opined, namely that while Wilde lived he was madly jealous of his love for Douglas and that after he was dead he was prompted in his really fine devotion by feelings perhaps not exclusively altruistic. It was perhaps for this reason that he praised Harris's faithful chronicle so highly. It gave him so fine a rôle. I wonder what he would have said about "The New Preface"?

Of course he knew as well as I do the many and perfidious lies that Harris was telling. For instance, Harris, in order to represent Wilde as a hopeless spendthrift, whom it was most difficult to help, frequently repeats that he, Ross, was making Oscar a regular allowance of £150 a year in addition to the £150 allowed him from his wife. Ross knew that this was

quite false; that until his mother's death, which occurred some time after Wilde was no more, he had no means beyond an allowance of £200 from his parent and small earnings as an occasional contributor to the Press. Yet he allows the lie to pass unchallenged, cruel as it is to Wilde's memory. He would certainly have given that and more, had he had it—he gave Wilde all he had and more, but he hadn't got it and so why allow the falsehood to stand and diminish the tragedy of his friend's last years? One can't help thinking that he accepted this misstatement as a bribe from Harris to allow many other misstatements of much graver import to go also unchallenged.

Harris's story, for instance, about the meeting between Jean Lorrain and Oscar Wilde at Mallarmé's house, which Harris represents as having taken place at the time of Wilde's supremacy. He says that being anxious to introduce him, Harris, to Mallarmé, whom I had introduced to Wilde at a *déjeuner* I gave at the Café Riche years before, Oscar took him to his rooms one afternoon. He adds that there was a large crowd present, that Oscar saw Jean Lorrain standing by the door and walked up to him conveying Harris and stretching out both his hands, that Jean Lorrain folded his arms and told Wilde that much to his regret he could no longer recognize him as a friend, that everybody was agog to hear what Wilde would say to such a public insult, and that to the huge delight of the large crowd Wilde said that it was very sad that at their ages men like Lorrain and himself must realize that they had no longer any *amis* (friends) but only *amants* (lovers).

Ross would know quite well that Wilde would never have made such a self-damnatory statement before such an audience, and should have pointed this out to Harris, when he had read the proofs of Harris's biography. He might have added that everybody knew that Mallarmé never received at his tiny flat in the rue de Rome till after dinner, that to write of there being a large crowd present in a small salon which at the very

most could not accommodate more than ten or twelve people was an absurdity; that Jean Lorrain in a notable article headed "Poussières de Paris" and signed "Raitif de la Bretonne," which appeared in *Le Journal*, six days after Wilde's death, telling his reminiscences of the dead artist and describing a lunch at his house in honour of Oscar Wilde, when Anatole France, Henry Bauer and Marcel Schwob were also present, related how Wilde, "speaking divinely as usual," told them a story about Lazarus and Christ of which he, Lorrain, had "ever afterwards preserved a living and penetrating memory" (this was in 1892 or 1893—when Wilde and Harris were never in Paris together), and that at the end of this article Lorrain said "*And I never saw Oscar Wilde again*"<sup>1</sup> That is to say, after 1893

If Ross passes over an anecdote like the above in Harris's narrative—an anecdote which he must have known to be completely false—and many similar stories which he equally well knew to be falsehoods, it is because he wished to do nothing to diminish the value of a chronicle in which, behind a camouflage of admiration and friendship, Wilde is represented not only as a homosexualist but as a depraved votary of this aberration in its worst form. Unhappily a homosexualist himself, as transpired years after I first made his acquaintance, Ross was probably most anxious that Wilde should be definitely portrayed as one of this lamentable brotherhood. It was a sort of palliation of his own abnormality that a man of such high intellect and of such supremely lovable qualities as Wilde should be shown, by the same implacable fatality, to be tarred with the same brush, branded on the forehead with the same iron.

May not the unhappy exiles on Molokai Island have found some comfort on the day when, on the breast of Father Damien, above his noble heart, appeared that pale white patch that told them that he was one of them, an outcast like them, doomed like them to an inevitable abhorrence?



I never saw Wilde bare his chest; I never saw the stigmata, and I described him as I knew him for seventeen years. If the overwhelming evidence has definitely established that he was one of those unfortunates whom a congenital curse has doomed to human abhorrence, I still think that it was unnecessary to depict him in that character or to portray him amidst the scenes that Harris with the approbation of Ross delights in. There is unfortunately by man's very nature a *cabinetto osceno* in that Temple which is the body of every man; but is it befitting that this secret chamber, set apart and under strictest interdict, should be made by the faithful chronicler of a great man's life almost exclusively the scene of all his activities, his performances there described as almost the sole topic of his conversation? Does a biographer follow his subject to the latrines?

Harris invents the Lorrain story to show how ready Wilde was to proclaim himself a pervert, even in public, which is directly opposed to fact.

But like Goethe's Reineke Fuchs on the famous occasion when he was summoned to appear before the King of the Beasts, the Lion, Harris having in Volume I exhausted all the materials which he found in Gide's books, my writings, old newspaper files and so on, seems to have exclaimed:

*"Luegen bedarf Es Luegen ueber alle Maasen"* (There is a need for lies, lies beyond all measure)

It is certain that from page 406 on, he indulges in a perfect frenzy of fake. He loses all restraint and all prudence. He tramples on fact, even on verisimilitude.

Directly after the Jean Lorrain anecdote, Harris invents a meeting between himself, Oscar Wilde and Esterhazy at a luncheon at Durand's restaurant. He had asked Oscar to "bring" Esterhazy to this lunch. One likes to think of anybody trying to "bring" the wary Esterhazy in 1898 to meet a foreign journalist at a café exclusively frequented by foreign

attachés. I happen to know a great deal about Esterhazy. Harris gives a description of the man which is as inaccurate as was his first portrait of the corporeal Wilde. It seems to indicate that he never even saw the commandant in the flesh. Esterhazy was *not* "below middle height." He looked what he was, a Hungarian aristocrat reduced to the penury of a half-pay French officer. He was the natural son of a daughter of Attila's line, a granddaughter of the Prince Esterhazy to whom Napoleon offered the crown of Hungary after Austerlitz. He wore on his little finger a heavy gold signet-ring engraved with the Esterhazy arms and Attila's device. "I am the Scourge of God." It was indirectly through me that Wilde may once have met him, for it was I who had introduced him to an English journalist named Rowland Strong and it was Strong who introduced him to Wilde at the Calisaya Bar on the boulevards. Esterhazy would of course know for what Wilde had been imprisoned and, like the he-man he was, would feel strong contempt for his alleged morals. He never mentioned Wilde's name to me, but I remember in what vitriolic terms he once referred to Rowland Strong and his friends. What makes me certain that Harris did not even meet him in the Calisaya Bar is that he describes him as boring him and Wilde at the imaginary lunch at Durand's by insisting on the fact that Dreyfus was "a traitor, a Jew and a German." Now during the whole period of the Dreyfus affair, I saw a great deal of Esterhazy in Paris, London and the Hague. I was acting as a newspaper man first for McClure, and afterwards for W. R. Hearst and so kept myself in touch with all sources of news. Well, I can solemnly declare that I never once heard Major Esterhazy say a single unkind word against Captain Dreyfus. If he ever mentioned him at all it was to speak of him as "that poor devil." He had apparently no wish whatever to represent Dreyfus as guilty. His job was to show that he, Esterhazy, was innocent. He was not inter-

ested in anything else, but he was most terribly interested in being thought innocent because he knew that to be convicted of the authorship of the *bordereau*, although he had been acquitted by court-martial on this charge, would inevitably lead to his arrest on other charges of treason and as inevitably bring him to face the firing-squad at Vincennes. He was haunted day and night by this terrible dread of certain requital. This is the man whom Harris describes as deliberately announcing in a public café, where all the other guests would be all ears for the conversation between the party in which two men so notorious as Esterhazy and Wilde were being trumpeted at by Frank Harris, that he, Esterhazy, was really and truly the author of the *bordereau*—a public confession which would have led to his arrest then and there, or at least before the *déjeuner* was over. It must be remembered that Esterhazy was under constant surveillance by the agents of Matthieu Dreyfus and his friends.

Voyons, Monsieur Harris! Voyons, voyons, Monsieur Ross! Voyons, voyons, voyons, Monsieur Georges Bernard Shaw!

But—with his usual contemptuous indifference towards his reader-dupes—the reckless Harris, least faithful of chroniclers, concludes this absurd fabrication with the remark that at the time Esterhazy made this public confession, for the mere purpose of getting a smart come-back on Wilde, not a living soul suspected him even of having had any connection whatever with the *bordereau*!

Let us examine this statement

The lunch at Durand's is supposed to have taken place in 1898. Wilde returned to Paris from Naples, after a sojourn at Genoa and Santa Margherita at the end of December, 1897. Already in 1897 Senator Scheurer-Kestner (Vice-President of the Senate) had publicly accused Esterhazy of being the author of the *bordereau*. He had been to see Méline, the Prime

Minister, and had denounced the Major as the real traitor. The Prime Minister had evoked the *chose jugée* and had declared that the government had no power to reopen the debate. Meanwhile Dreyfus's relations had learned what was the conclusion to which Scheurer-Kestner had come, had examined Esterhazy's letters and taken expert opinion on the writing of the letters and of the famous *bordereau*. The result was that on November 15th, 1897, Matthieu Dreyfus addressed a letter to the Minister of War formally accusing Esterhazy of the crime for which his brother was suffering. This letter was communicated by the Agence Havas to all the papers and copies of it were published all over the world. The Court-Martial of Esterhazy followed early in 1898. Esterhazy was triumphantly, if unjustly, acquitted and yet is represented by Frank Harris as having, at a lunch with him and Wilde at Durand's a month or two later, publicly announced his guilt "at a time," says Harris, "when no one even suspected him of any connection with the *bordereau*!"<sup>11</sup>

And not one of the critics of Davray's French version seems to have detected the imposture. It is true that Davray must have known that his friend and whilom employer Harris was lying in his throat, for I note that in his version he carefully suppresses the sentence that so completely exposes the fraud, the sentence where Harris states that nobody suspected Esterhazy at the time he made this public confession. Davray, who plays a curious rôle in Harris's imposture, probably remembered something of the facts, and not having Harris's contempt for his public realized that to print this sentence would expose the whole fake to his French readers.

Immediately after the Esterhazy fabrication Harris reprints, probably to prove that Wilde in his conversation was "almost invariably kind and generous," the well-known story about Wilde's cutting remark to Sir Lewis Morris, when the latter complained to him that his books were being boycotted, that

there existed against him a "conspiracy of silence" and asked Wilde what to do about it. Harris represents Wilde as having replied: "A conspiracy of silence? Join it at once, my dear fellow "

Now Harris, just as well as Shaw and Ross, knew when he wrote that that Wilde never said this to the unhappy poet. He was much too kindhearted to do so. I never knew Wilde wilfully to hurt anybody's feelings. Harris had no excuse, because in 1915 he had my *The Real Oscar Wilde* on his table, and on page 301 of that book he could have gotten the correct version, which was originally given by Augustine Birrell to Mr Herbert Vivian, who was interviewing him for one of his "Studies in Personality" for the *Pall Mall Magazine*. Vivian had said to Birrell "I should not think that you often found yourself at a loss for an answer," and Birrell had replied:

That reminds me of a certain poet who came to me once upon a time and complained that his works were neglected. He said there was a conspiracy of silence. Of course I felt very sorry for him, but I was really puzzled what to say. I mentioned this to a well-known wit, who exclaimed quite angrily "You did not know what to say! Do you mean to tell me that you did not know what to say?"—"No, upon my word I did not"—"Of course, you should have said 'A conspiracy of silence! My dear fellow, join it at once'"

The true story—for, of course, the "well-known wit" was Oscar Wilde, whose name the chaste lips of the Secretary for Ireland could not bring themselves to pronounce—shows that Oscar was quick in repartee. Harris's rendering of it shows Wilde ready to wound the feelings of an eminently well-meaning if tedious personage insufficiently popular to excite anybody's hostility. This is another instance of how Harris tries to show how merciless Oscar was in repartee. Compare the anecdote about Oscar and Mrs John Strange Winter or the one about Madame Bovet, where Harris describes Oscar as "bowing low" when he fires the barbed shaft. Poor Oscar,

in his Roman Emperor days! as though he could bow low. In this last story Harris shows himself the plebeian that he always remained under his Park-Lane veneer. The Bovet story would have given Wilde great pain, could he have read it.

The continuation of this amazing chapter contains an account of an alleged occasion on which Madame Emilienne d'Alençon supped with Harris and Wilde at some unnamed boulevard café in the company of a street-urchin, which is even more ridiculous and more wildly impossible than the Esterhazy fake. This story, by the way, is one of the passages to which Robert Ross refers when he writes in his eulogy of *The Life and Confessions* that "Some of the incidents Harris describes (the 'gamin' scene in Paris, for example) are so vividly characteristic that I could swear they happened exactly as narrated, even though I wasn't present at the precise episodes given."

This is, in brief, the story in six pages of pure Munchausen. Harris in the summer of 1898 has arrived in Paris. Wilde has been living in abject poverty at the Hôtel de Nice in the rue des Beaux Arts on an allowance of £10 a month from his wife and occasional cheques of a very small denomination from Smithers on account of royalties from the *Ballad of Reading Gaol*. He gets his meals chiefly at Bosie's flat in the Avenue Kléber, where, according to Lord Alfred, the servants had orders to feed him even in Bosie's absence and frequently obliged him with trifling loans when he was on the rocks. Harris takes Oscar to the Théâtre Français to see a new play. Lavish as ever, he has paid £8 for the two tickets to the stalls. The play bores Oscar, so when after the first act they have gone out into the street to smoke a cigarette, Oscar says the play is so stupid—the author evidently knowing nothing about love—that he would prefer to walk up and down outside the theatre and talk with Harris, and suggests that Harris, who was keen on getting the value of his forty iron men, can easily find somebody who would accept the tickets as a gift. At

that very moment they are accosted under the colonnade by a "guttersnipe" of Paris, a lad of fifteen or sixteen, who hails Wilde by name and whom Wilde greets by his Christian name of "Jules." At Wilde's behest Harris gives the delighted guttersnipe the counterfoils of the two hundred-franc tickets, tells him what they cost and advises him to sell them. The boy's "sharp face" lights up and he darts away "in a flash" from the only spot in Paris where he would be likely to find a customer for his wares. Oscar is vastly pleased to have been recognized by Jules, and Harris connotes his gratification of a puerile vanity. While they are walking away up the Avenue de l'Opéra Wilde tells Harris that he calls this "guttersnipe" Jules d'Alençon, because he so much resembles the famous beauty on the Paris vaudeville stage, Emilienne d'Alençon, that he has told her that Jules must be her brother. He adds that he has had them both dining with him once—at the very time when he was panhandling at Douglas's "tiny flat" in the Avenue Kléber and had £10 a month for all other necessities of life. Harris appends a note to the name of Madame d'Alençon of which all I can say is that it is fortunate that Davray was prudent enough to suppress it in his French version, as otherwise there might have been considerable doings on the part of that "fine-looking man," the lady's present husband, down on the Promenade des Anglais, Nice, and at the office of the *Mercure de France* when Davray was in town, doings in which a horsewhip—the man was formerly a horseman—would certainly have played a striking part. Oscar goes on to suggest that they should go to Olympia, where Emilienne was appearing at the time, and "take her" out to supper. They go, they take a box, they send Emilienne a note, she joins them after the show, they go to supper on the boulevards, and while they are discussing a *soupe à l'oignon* or a *choucroûte garnie* (which is all the supper one could get in those days at any café in Paris after 9 p.m.) Oscar sees Jules

passing on the boulevard, and raps at the window Jules comes in and joins the supper-party Oscar points out the resemblance between the two Harris does not see it. He finds Emilienne pretty, but dull and commonplace Oscar rhapsodizes over the perfect beauty of the boy, Harris finds him dirty and unwashen, Emilienne begs Harris to get her a job in London and to give her some good advance press-agency matter in the *Saturday Review* When Emilienne sees that the two men are really only interested in the Antinous-like and unwashen guttersnipe, she jumps up and says good-bye. The boy vanishes also, and Frank and Oscar perambulate the boulevards discussing Greek love

And this is the rubbish that Ross finds "vivid and characteristic," and that no doubt Mr Bernard Shaw approved of as much as of the rest of the "faithful chronicle" Does Mr Shaw, who certainly knows something about the world and (as evinced by his many plays) has observed the ways of ladies who are not too difficult of access, does Mr. Shaw, I say, really believe that Emilienne d'Alençon—at that time at the very summit of the Parisian world of amusement—would meekly respond to a supper invitation sent in to her at the music-hall where she is appearing, from a man of whom she knew little except that he had been in prison for loathsome offences in England, that he was in dire poverty and was sheltering at that moment in a tenth-rate hotel in the Latin quarter? And that she would, leaving behind her the scores of elegant dandies who were thronging the Olympia greenroom in hopes of her company, and even if her particular friend were not in attendance, trot out obediently to join Harris and Wilde at a café where a ragged and dirty lad was afterwards fetched in from the street to share in the entertainment?

And did not Mr Shaw, the novelist, note Harris's abuse of the long arm of coincidence how Antinous, parted from at the Théâtre Français, appears outside the boulevard café so that



Wilde sees him and can summon him inside, so that the comparison may be made between him and the lady? Is it not too ridiculous for words? Especially if one remembers who and what Emilienne d'Alençon was, and how unlikely it was that she would exhibit herself with two such men as Wilde and Harris and a boulevard *voyou* in a public café?

The whole story is not worth discussing one moment further. That is to say as concerns its credibility. It affords, however, a good example of Harris's feebleness of invention. Boileau tells us, it is true, that there is great art in not telling one's readers all, but Harris's lapses cannot be condoned by this axiom. We have seen how the phantom incubus of Portora vanishes from Harris's pages without recall, we have seen how Walter Pater is left on his knees with his lips pressed to Wilde's hand in a public park in Oxford and how no further reference whatever is made to this weird attachment in the book. In this story about Emilienne's "brother" (so much admired by Robert Ross) Harris forgets that Wilde being what he was, a kindly man, *ein leutseliger Herr*, the very first question he would have put to Jules would have been to ask him how he had got on with Harris's 200-franc counterfoils. Every reader would expect at least a word or two about this. Even the lordly lucre-despising Harris might have shown some interest in this matter. But not a word, so indifferent is he to fact (or the semblance thereof), so eager is he to get to his homosexual filth.

But infinitely more probatory that the story of Esterhazy's confession to him and Wilde at Durand's is clumsy fake, is the fact that in his contempt for his readers, he leaves them all in the dark as to what, after the commandant had left them, were the reactions of Wilde and himself to this appalling revelation. He has told his readers that at that time not a soul suspected that Esterhazy had had anything to do with the writing of the *bordereau* for which Dreyfus had been convicted.

Esterhazy's confession had been made quite voluntarily, without any pressure from Wilde or Harris. Dreyfus at that moment was suffering agonies on Devil's Island. Wilde, who, we all know, was a man of kind heart, and Harris who, Shaw tells us, was always on the side of the oppressed, have therefore heard from the real culprit's own lips that Dreyfus is an innocent man and is suffering from the most cruel injustice. Does Wilde, smarting from the Reading rods, does Harris, aglow with the indignation that prompts a Bayard to doughty deeds of retribution, leap to his feet? Not a bit of it. Harris describes their several reactions. They lie back in their chairs and roar with laughter. And the matter is then allowed to drop without another word on either side. There is no hurried consultation, no two-pair brougham galloping off to the Ministry of War, or of Justice, no telephone message to the sorrowing relatives of the prisoner who has so completely been absolved. Harris does not see how in this fabrication he covers both himself and Wilde with infamy. Dreyfus was not brought back to France to stand his second trial at Rennes till one year later. And all this while, neither Wilde nor Harris breathed a syllable of the statement which, made before the court-martial at Rennes, would have washed him white as snow. It might possibly have been repugnant to Wilde to produce himself as a witness for the defence, in view of his past, but what about Harris? Would he not have leaped at the opportunity that Rennes would have afforded him to take the centre of the stage there—in the eyes of the whole universe—to have proclaimed and proved the prisoner's innocence?

Will anybody, outside a Kindergarten or an Institution for Idiots, give the faintest credence to this absurd story?

## CHAPTER XVII

### "A GREAT ROMANTIC PASSION"

IT is in the Twenty-Second Chapter of his *Life and Confessions* (page 450, Vol II) that Harris reaches, in this "faithful chronicle" of the story of Oscar Wilde, the very lowest depths of turpitude. So far he has only presented us with a Wilde who is weak, pampered, effeminate, mendacious, hilarious now, now lachrymose, a self-proclaiming pervert, a nauseating olla podrida, *certes*, but so soured in such a syrupy sauce of adulatory admiration that one can almost forgive Bernard Shaw, whose pabulum, we know, is restricted to the simple fruits of the earth, for so misjudging the dish so cunningly dressed that he could write and tell Harris that kindness could not well be carried further. Shaw one can almost understand, at least as far as this Twenty-Second Chapter, but Ross, Robert Baldwin Ross? Shaw saw very little of Wilde, they were entirely antithetic and Shaw took such delight in Harris's portraiture of his contemporaries that I can sometimes fancy him adapting Burns and pacing his study to the rhyme

Oh! wad some power the giftie gie us  
To see oursel'es as Harris sees us

*Pour les autres*, of course

But Robert Baldwin Ross?

Harris's Twenty-Second Chapter bears the same caption as the one I have headed mine with "A Great Romantic Passion."

In this chapter we are to be shown the pervert (whom we have followed so far with pity rather than disgust) as the bibulous,

deliberate debauchee, the cynical, heartless corrupter of innocent boyhood. Of this last vileness none of Wilde's worst enemies and traducers ever once accused him. The attempt of the prosecuting Treasury at his second trial to show the prisoner in this diabolical incarnation, was, we know, pitchforked back on to the Treasury dungheap by Mr Justice Wills, to the "sick chagrin" of Sir Frank Lockwood, who was heard to mutter. "What an old fool!"

Douglas has pointed out that it was never charged against Wilde at any time that he had been a corrupter of youth; that there never was an innocent one among the wretched fellows he was proved to have associated with.

But Harris has a very different story to tell. It is in this nefarious chapter that he attempts to justify the title of his book as regards "Confessions."

The story is, in brief, that on a journey down to the South with Oscar Wilde in November, 1898, Harris having noticed that Wilde seemed very miserable and indeed had evidently been weeping copiously, and having rallied him on his condition—as well he might seeing how he had during the previous week showered gold upon him and the fact that he was taking him at his sole expense to have "a perfect six months" on the Riviera—Wilde, with tears filling his eyes, told him that his great grief arose from the circumstance that this journey to sunshine and blue seas had interrupted a "great romantic passion" and had separated him from a Florentine bronze-like youth with large and lustrous eyes and an exquisite, olive-brown complected face, who reminded one of the First Consul (presumably after Napoleon had quite recovered from the ravages of the acarus that passed on to him at Toulon), that he had met this youth in the street outside Maire's on the very night when he was waiting for Harris (who had wired him from London) to dine with him at that restaurant. Wilde tells how his heart stood still and how he followed the Florentine

bronze, who was in the uniform of a *pioupiau*, and took him to a café to have a drink; that he then and there began his infernal process of seduction, that the lad was willing to continue the acquaintance but wanted a bicycle with nickel-plated handle-bars and ditto chains, and that when he had promised to send him one (a gift which would have swallowed up his whole income for a couple of months, and have left him to depend for his subsistence on Douglas's handouts at the Avenue Kléber), the young soldier promised to come to his hotel on the following Thursday, that he had then gone on to Maire's and joined the party, Harris and his wife, Lord Alfred Douglas, and R——, that the lad had come to his hotel (Hôtel de Nice, rue des Beaux Arts) as agreed, and that the association had lasted right up to that very evening, when the soldier had come to the Gare de Lyons and dined with him at the restaurant in that station where Harris had just found him in tears, by the table whence the Florentine bronze had fled, carrying off inside him his share of the contents of "the surprising number of empty bottles" which Harris had noticed on the table when he found Wilde weeping by his vacant chair. Wilde then passionately defends abnormal love, while Harris argues for the love that is normal. Harris puts words into Wilde's mouth which suggest that Wilde looked to Athens for his light—the truth being, of course, that, perfect Hellenist as he was, nobody knew better than he the horror and disgust with which Athens regarded, and the severity with which she punished, such violations of the natural and social laws. The conversation as reported by Harris covers twelve ipecacuanhic pages, till merciful sleep swathes Harris in silence. They reach Napoule, he tells us, at ten next morning and the wonderful six months' holiday begins for both.

When I had read through this horrible chapter and remembered that Robert Ross had let it pass into the world without one word of condemnation, though nobody knew better than

himself from Wilde's own letters to him that it was all a fabrication as vile as it was clumsy, I could not but recall a passage in *Æschines'* philippic where the orator asks the archontes whether they do not think that Hegesander, wishing to make his conduct—conduct which is known to everybody—appear less culpable, has caused Timarchus to commit nameless excesses with the idea that his own actions will appear moderate in comparison?

In the letter which Wilde wrote to Ross about the dinner at Maire's—when the “bill was terrific” and when Rostand “with one of his mistresses,” dining at an adjoining table, listened so intently to Harris holding forth on the “Greek passions of Christ and Shakespeare”—he specially tells Ross that he had “made Frank Harris invite Bosie to dinner” and that “Bosie was child-like and sweet.” This is a few minutes after the Florentine bronze has come into his life and has taken his heart by storm and the great romantic passion has been started. But not a line about it to Ross, though he would know how much it would please Ross to hear that Bosie's influence would be likely to be much less in the future.

In the letter which he wrote to Ross on the Saturday of the week during which Harris had descended upon him in such a shower of gold as could be formed of four or five hundred pounds, he tells him that Harris and he are going to La Napoule on the morrow night. Yet in the course of their conversation in the train after they returned in their pyjamas from getting a bowl of coffee on the station-platform by the early light of dawn (at the end of November!) Harris represents Wilde as asking him where they are going to, as Harris has not yet told him; and Harris adds that it was for him to choose, and suggests a choice between Agay and La Napoule and an unnamed place up in the hills behind Nice. Wilde decides on La Napoule, the place which according to his letter the day before had been definitely agreed upon between him and his

host Harris forgets here that such vagueness as to one's destination when one takes a train may sound lordly enough but that even a dense reader will ask "Where were their tickets for? What about their luggage, which would have to be registered at the Gare de Lyon? Or did they travel without luggage for a six-months' stay on the Riviera, near fashionable Cannes?" For if they had booked for Agay and then had decided to go on to Mandelieu-La-Napoule and pay the difference at the latter station, their registered baggage would have been put out at Agay and they would have had to send back for it. And a similar imbroglio if they had decided on Mandelieu-La-Napoule and had got out at Agay, sixteen kilometres nearer to Marseilles.

Further, Ross was a frequent traveller, as escort to his mother, on the trains from Paris to the Riviera, yet Harris's story of taking a train from Paris some good time after an early dinner-hour, let us say at 8 p.m., that allowed them to get out in the "early, pearly morning" for a bowl of non-existent coffee on the platform at Avignon (the buffet tenant there not being allowed to compete with the trains de luxe which cater for all meals and refreshments for their passengers) seems not to have raised the least query in his complacent mind, any more than did Harris's further statement that they arrive at La Napoule by ten o'clock in the morning. Even to-day, though the service between Paris and the Riviera has been vastly improved, the 7.40 p.m. train de luxe only reaches Avignon at 6.1 a.m., when the morning might be early but certainly would not be pearly, in fact when it would be pitch dark towards the end of November. It reaches Marseilles at 7.45 a.m., but as its passengers are plutocrats and not pikers it doesn't stop at any such tin-horn place as Agay, nor such a one-horse resort as Mandelieu, but goes whizzing on to Cannes as first stop after St. Raphael. So the two disputants would have to get out at Marseilles, allow their registered baggage to go ever eastward

## "A GREAT ROMANTIC PASSION"

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without them, and wait for a local train which would land them in Agay or La Napoule hours after Harris's schedule.

Being myself, however, more concerned with my unhappy friend's honour and his reputation in the years to come than Mr Robert Baldwin Ross, when I had read this abominable chapter, to which Ross has given his approval, knowing that it was a tissue of falsehoods and suspecting that the journey had never taken place at all and that consequently Harris's report of Wilde's confession in transit was a cruel and malicious invention, I wrote to the archivist of the P L M railway company at the Gare de Lyon, and appealing to that interest in things literary which distinguishes every educated Frenchman, begged him to inform me after consulting the time-tables of his line for November, 1898, to tell me at what hour passengers would have to leave the Gare de Lyon terminus in Paris to be able to land at Agay or Napoule by ten o'clock next morning I append a translation of this gentleman's answer

PARIS,

28th November, 1929

SIR,

In your letter of November 21st, you have been so good as to ask us at what o'clock a passenger would have had to leave our Gare de Lyon station in Paris, by train de luxe, in November, 1898, so as to reach La Napoule at about ten o'clock on the morrow morning

I have the honour to inform you that in 1898 our winter-service included the *train de luxe*, L 21, which left Paris at 5 40 in the evening This train, however, which stopped at Avignon at 4 17 ("the exact hour given is 4 hours 17 minutes and 23 seconds") and reached Marseilles at 6 h 02 m 09 sec did not stop at Napoule It was necessary to change at St Raphael-Valescure (which was reached at 8 51 a m) and to leave this station at 9 02 a m so as to get to La Napoule at 9 42 a m.



Please receive, Sir, the expression of my very distinguished consideration

THE INGÉNIEUR EN CHEF DE L'EXPLOITATION

(Signature)

Comparing the above schedule with Harris's story, we see that Wilde must have got through his dinner with the Florentine bronze at the Gare de Lyon buffet, at which a surprising number of bottles of wine were drunk by the infatuated couple, shortly before 5 p m, because their tearful leave-taking would take up at least a quarter of an hour and because after the martial Antinous had left and Wilde had had a good cry by himself there was still time, for Harris, obviously Impransus (like Doctor Johnson on many occasions), had time on arriving at the buffet to have a consolatory cup of coffee (made let us hope with the waters of Lethe) while waiting for the train. So dinner for Wilde must have begun well before four, and as he tells Ross he never finishes lunch till well after 2 p m. and there were oodles of wine to drink. Harris Impransus is so taken up in the train with his dialogue on the morals of the Greeks that he forgoes all food or refreshment—at least he says nothing about it in his detailed narrative—till they get to Avignon where the November sun is rising at seventeen minutes and twenty-three seconds past four o'clock, and where he and Wilde in pyjamas alight and go to the non-existent platform stall for more coffee.

This documented proof that Harris was lying and that his narrative is quite worthless is, however, only the Hindenburg line of defence drawn round the citadel in which such honour as the world (harshly judging a wretched man congenitally abnormal, whom disease later rendered insane) had left him is jealously guarded the honour that the impartial must admit in a man of passions overwhelming to the point of dementia to whom innocence and purity were sacrosanct; in a man who

never uttered one gross or unseemly word, in a writer who never penned a line that might corrupt or taint

For behind this first line of defence there is yet my Wotan line, against which the Frankish forces will hurl themselves in vain, supposing they have broken through my Hindenburg line by means of plausible explanations about Harris's lack of memory and the argument that if he disremembered the exact schedule of his journey with Wilde that night, that does not disprove the conversation, does not delete the confession in all its wicked foulness

My Wotan line of defence is the simple statement that Frank Harris never travelled to La Napoule with Wilde at all, that Wilde went there alone without Harris, whom he only saw again six or seven weeks later

This section being under the command of General Léon Lemonnier, Wilde's latest biographer, who has had access to many of Wilde's letters and notably to those he wrote to Robert Ross, let him depose to facts I have cited as unsurmountable and decisive, in proof that the story of the journey was a fabrication and consequently that the "confession" never was made. He has narrated from Wilde's letter to Ross how Harris had helped Wilde and how in order that he might work in more congenial surroundings he was to take him to La Napoule. It had been arranged that the two friends were to leave on the Sunday night, as Wilde had written to Ross. Now, M Léon Lemonnier.

At the very moment of departure, Harris disappeared mysteriously but left Wilde the money for the journey. Wilde travelled to La Napoule and put up there at the Hôtel des Bains and waited there in vain for any news of Harris. He made there the acquaintance of an Englishman, named Harold Mellor and made friends with him. The two men spent much of their time together. At the end of January, 1899, Harris turned up at last and took Oscar to Cannes to see the Battle of Flowers. Wilde and Mellor left Napoule together at the end of February.

Lemonnier is nothing if not strictly chronological. His dates are as exact as a railway time-table and can absolutely be relied upon. We know, accordingly, that Harris was not with Wilde at Napoule till near the end of January, 1899, and that, consequently, the narrative of Wilde's doings and sayings during the period between his first arrival at La Napoule at the beginning of December, 1898, and Harris's coming towards the end of January, 1899, is entirely worthless as biography, though as affording insight into Harris's own character and his literary methods it is not without interest to the student of biographical teratologists.

However, before examining his narrative from that point of view let us revert to Wilde's monstrous "confession" in the train. I imagine that when Harris was fabricating the story about the Florentine bronze in his Catskills crucible, he did not trouble to realize that his book would one day be translated into French and be read in Paris, where the whole story which he puts into poor Wilde's mouth would only excite derision for its absurd impossibility. When I quoted it to a high official at the Paris Prefecture of Police, on the occasion of my visit to M. Chiappe, the Prefect, for the purposes of this book, that gentleman simply shrugged his shoulders, laughed and pointed to his empty grate, the receptacle, he had told me, of all the malicious slander that every morning of the year poured into his office. But Harris had builded better than he knew, and from the notices which Davray published in the *Mercure* it is apparent that he did not excite either incredulity or indignation by his clumsy fabrications on matters on which any Paris urchin could have put them wise—amongst quite a number of distinguished and remarkable Parisians such as Henri de Régnier, Georges Maurevert, Maurice Beaubourg, and Maître José Théry (even Théry, a lawyer steeped in law, criminal practice and Parisian police procedure). At any rate, all the critics cited by Davray seem

like Ross, Sinclair and Shaw to have drunk down Harris's nauseous draught like so much new milk. A smart Parisian is asked by Harris to believe that in Paris in the year 1898 a foreigner, who was under sharp police supervision, arranged for purposes of immoral association for a young soldier in barracks in Paris, to whom he had presented a nickel-plated bicycle, to visit him on certain fixed days every week either at his hotel (where he had only a small bedroom) or at some other rendezvous that they had agreed upon; that the soldier carried out his agreement and constantly visited his friend, who (although documents exist to prove that at that time his total income was less than 300 fr a month) loaded him with gifts and entertained him to sumptuous feasts at which great quantities of wine were drunk, at leading Paris cafés

Now anybody who knows anything about a soldier's life in a Paris barracks will know that not twenty-four hours would have elapsed after the arrival of the nickel-plated bicycle at the barracks, before every single *pioupiou* in the caserne would know of the origin of this bicycle, and that before another twenty-four hours had elapsed it would have come to the colonel's knowledge that a mysterious and remarkable-looking foreigner had made this handsome present to one of his "young people" and was expecting the young soldier to visit him every week. The colonel, not having the delightful naiveté of Messrs Henri de Régnier and José Théry, and being, oh! so worldly-wise, would have acted promptly and this is what would have ensued

The colonel would at once have sent a note to Police Headquarters to inquire what was known there about this mysterious Englishman. The young soldier would have been watched and followed. Certainly, after keeping his first rendezvous with Sebastian Melmoth a report would have been sent up to the colonel. The soldier would have been brought up to the *salle des rapports* to explain before his chief what were his

relations with this foreigner. The immediate result would have been that M. Sebastian Melmoth would have received from the Prefect of Police an *ordre administratif* requesting him to leave the territory of the French Republic within twenty-four hours.

Supposing, however, that all this had escaped the notice of the colonel, and that police intervention had not been invoked by him, it would not have been very long—and the great romantic passion is said to have lasted several months—before, through another channel, police headquarters would have been informed of something “*pas Catholique*” that was going on at a small hotel in the Latin quarter, which certainly required further investigation. Every morning, year in, year out, an inspector of police from the *service des garnis*, calls at every hotel and lodging-house in Paris to read the names of the people who have spent the preceding night there. The inspector who was detailed to call at the Hôtel de Nice where Wilde was living would have special instructions with regard to M. Sebastian Melmoth. On his return to headquarters, after the young soldier’s first two or three visits, a note would have been passed to the *service des mœurs*, certain investigations would have resulted, Wilde and the Florentine bronze would have been shadowed and the mere fact of Wilde’s having forced his company on the youthful recruit would, in view of his unfortunate reputation, have been deemed all-sufficient to warrant the issue of an administrative order of expulsion.

Harris is particularly cruel in his report of this conversation with Wilde in the train because he represents Wilde as telling him that on their first meeting the lad spoke to him of his mother. “He spoke to me first of his mother,” he quotes him as saying, “Yes, Frank, of his mother!” And Harris adds “Here Oscar could not help smiling.”

The established fact that Harris was not with Wilde at La Napoule during the whole of December, 1898, and almost the

whole of January, 1899, shows that there were no conversations between them during that period, and that therefore Harris has relied on his memory strongly tinged with malice to concoct Wilde's words during this imaginary companionship. However, in places where his memory is accurate and unbiassed he does record some of Wilde's *dicta* which were well worth preserving, such as his comments on different literary men and artists of mark in England at that time—Ricketts and Shannon; Arthur Symons, George Moore, Bernard Shaw, Wells, Hardy, Hall Caine and Marie Corelli, all agreeably pungent but perhaps indiscreet. But the little that is valuable and obviously genuine, though spoken at other times, is mixed up with much fabrication, the object of which seems to be to present Wilde in an odious light, just like his constant references to Wilde's fondness for and pursuit of the Napoule fisher-lads. But a perfectly wicked thing is where he represents Wilde during this imaginary period as giving a foul account of why marital relations had ceased between him and Constance, who at that moment, at sacrifice to herself and her children, was helping him to live. Do Ross and Shaw profess to believe that Wilde ever spoke those words on page 486? Can they imagine the courteous, kindly, dignified Oscar making such a confidence on so sacred a subject as his love for his wife to plebeian, woman-hunting Harris? Everybody knew in London that Wilde had deserted the thalamus not long after the birth of his second son. I wondered at it at the time, but attributed it to mere *tædium amoris* on both sides. Since it has been definitely established what was the complaint that first drove Wilde mad and then killed him, just as it killed poor Maupassant after having first stimulated and then destroyed his brain, I came to the logical conclusion that doubtless some “*affaire de canapé*” as Napoleon called it, having rendered him an invalid, he naturally withdrew at once from all contacts which might imperil others and so, his con-

genital impulses resurgent, fell into those horrible associations which led to his downfall. The extraordinary brilliancy of his last play, as different from his previous dramatical works as was Maupassant's *Boule de Suif* from his preceding literary productions, almost allows one to fix the approximate date of the fleeting but fatal contact which brought him to such utter ruin.

In his faithful chronicle, where it would be impossible to "carry kindness further without sentimental folly," Harris is careful while relating anything that diminishes Wilde or shows him in an unfavourable light, to suppress on the contrary anything favourable. He never mentions one of the several projects of literary work which the poor impotent frequently discussed, but insists more than once on a "Ballad of a Fisher-boy" of which he says Wilde often spoke and of which Wilde recited three or four first verses to him, doubtless by the wireless telephone as he was hundreds of miles away from Wilde at the time. It is indifferent that the wireless telephone had not yet been invented in 1899. It does not make the story any less untrue. He uses these imaginary conversations to make deductions from things Wilde never said which are always unfavourable to his friend. He repeats that "Oscar was a snob by nature." He is constantly showing us Oscar in tears. On the boulevard as he and Wilde were walking home after that famous supper, and they had been talking of the consequences that Greek morality had had for him, he speaks of the tears that were pouring down Wilde's cheeks. I knew Wilde seventeen years and was with him in the bitterest moments of his despair, but I never once saw him unmanned. Harris, however, wants Wilde to go down to posterity as weak and effeminate, which is exactly what he was not.

He is careful to tell us of the cruel way in which Sir George Alexander cut Oscar on the road to Cannes when he passed Oscar on his bicycle. He relates how very flushed and indig-

nant Wilde was when he came home and told him of the mortifying incident. This incident took place on December 26th, 1898, when Harris was nowhere near the Hôtel des Bains, but as he no doubt heard of it later—Wilde wrote off at once to complain to Robert Ross—he uses it to make one believe that he had accompanied Wilde to La Napoule. He, however, carefully omits to refer to a gratifying meeting Wilde had a few days later with somebody far greater than the pitiful Alexander, though here he might truthfully have shown us Wilde in tears. Let Lemonnier, who has read Wilde's letters to Ross, tell the story. "Some days later," writes Lemonnier, "Wilde had his *revanche*. He went to see Sarah (Bernhardt) play *la Tosca* at Nice, and he went to see her in her dressing-room. She folded him in her arms and the two mingled their tears." Not only could Harris have shown Wilde lachrymose once more, but magnanimous. People who remember how shabbily the great actress had treated him over *Salomé*, how after promising to purchase all the rights of this play for a most moderate sum at the time when he was penniless in Holloway Gaol and desperate for the means to provide for his defence, she shuffled out of her promise and would not part with a centime, might well see magnanimity in Wilde's conduct in going to see her in Nice. There is not a word about this striking incident in Harris's biography, and Sarah is only mentioned to stress Wilde's snobbishness because he spoke of her with admiration. I really cannot get away from the conviction that Harris had a bitter grudge against Wilde at heart and in consequence always shows him in the very worst light. Wilde's reluctance to allow him to batten on his brains may have been one reason, but I think that the *teterrima causa* of this obvious hostility—obvious in spite of the smoke-clouds of admiring adulation that rise around the central figure of his book—proceeded from the constant sense of his complete inferiority in every single respect to Oscar Wilde, inferiority



in appearance, looks, stature, inferiority in birth, family and education, inferiority—oh! how great!—in knowledge and scholarship, inferiority in social success and literary achievement, and, above all, inferiority in those elusive qualities proceeding from heredity and good breeding which distinguish a gentleman from a plebeian qualities that can never be assumed but for which simplicity, modesty and goodheartedness—none of which Harris possessed in the faintest degree—are often taken as an acceptable substitute

I am sure that Harris must at all times when producing himself in public by the side of Oscar Wilde, bitterly have felt the terrible superiority of his friend. He would read it in the eyes of all who saw the two together. I have often wondered what may have been the thoughts of Edmond Rostand that night at Mairé's, when Harris and his wife were entertaining Wilde and Bosie, and R—— was with them. Wilde has described this dinner and its sumptuousness and the way in which Rostand, at an adjoining table, seemed listening so intently to Harris, who as usual monopolizing the conversation was roaring out, in a place where quiet and consideration for the comfort of others were *de rigueur*, foolish and blasphemous nonsense about the "Greek loves of Jesus Christ and Shakespeare." I can imagine the pitying glances that the quiet, refined, retiring, modest Rostand must have turned from the noisy Barnum to his guest, the fallen gentleman and the artist who had been hurled into the gutter. I can imagine Rostand's thoughts and I am sure that in the midst of all his blatancy and of all his pride of purse, Harris must have read reprobation there also. It seems certain also that on such occasions Wilde may faintly by a mere look or word have recalled the noisy trumpeter of theories certain to offend outside some Bohemian café of Montmartre or the Latin quarter to some sense of propriety and decorum, and that that would rankle intolerably in the man's memory

Otherwise it is difficult to understand his constant efforts to show Wilde at his worst, and greatly to exaggerate this worst, and still more difficult to understand his reason for the foul fabrications about Wilde's brother and about his wife which he actually puts into Wilde's own mouth, to leave the odium of them to him. I also totally disbelieve much of what Harris quotes as having been said about Douglas. If Wilde had wanted or had been able to make such charges it is at the Old Bailey that he would have made them. He would not have waited till after he had served his sentence to confide in Harris—of all persons—nor would he have exposed himself to the ridicule of that cynical roué by pleading that it was Douglas who had introduced him to the servants in the House of Shame. There is no protocol requisite here, no gold-laced Introducer of Ambassadors.

He writes maliciously about all Wilde's friends and even attacks the kindly Mellor whom Wilde found at La Napoule, and who afterwards took Wilde to stay with him in Switzerland. He launches in his very first lines about him a foul innuendo. But he is careful to suppress that it was on his journey to Gland with Mellor that Wilde, reaching Genoa, went to lay some flowers on poor Constance's grave. Harris had something else to say about this grave and duly said it.

He can have spent only a very short time at the Hôtel des Bains, for on February 14th, 1899, he was writing to Davray who was then working for him as a press-agent for his, (Harris's) hotel at Monte Carlo, telling him that he had just returned from a trip to Corsica and would like to see him at the Palace Hotel a month later. It is noteworthy that he never asked Wilde to come to this hotel but left him at the cheap little inn at La Napoule where pension was six francs a day, but where, as he tells us, the Mocha coffee was not very satisfactory and the champagne left much to be desired.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### HOW FRANK PUT OSCAR IN EASY STREET

HARRIS had all the less excuse for his lies about Wilde's conduct during the year 1898—the year of “the great romantic passion”—that we know that during the whole time he was concocting his narrative he had at hand André Gide's little brochure about Wilde which he copiously both quoted and plagiarized. From this book he could have gathered—though, of course, he was well aware of the fact—that during the whole of that year, 1898, when he depicted Wilde as spending money lavishly on Florentine bronzes, Wilde was in one of those periods of “extreme poverty” to which Robert Ross refers in the preface to *De Profundis*.

Wilde returned to Paris after the Naples fiasco in December, 1897. Lady Queensberry's £200, which Bosie had put—“crowns for convoy”—into Oscar's purse, had all been spent and he had no means of subsistence except an allowance of £10 or £12 a month, supplemented by occasional dribbles from Smithers, the publisher. How small these were may be gathered from his letters to Smithers. On March 15th, 1898, he writes from the Hôtel de Nice “1000 thanks for the £4.” Two months later, he writes from the same address, May 20th, 1898, to beg him, if he can, to send him £4, “or even £3” so that he can get his morning breakfast at his inn, where one supposes they had refused to give him credit any longer. But let us concede that Harris had not seen these pitiful letters (in which threats of suicide are not infrequent), he certainly had read in Gide, how one evening in the summer of the

great and costly passion, he was hailed by Wilde as he was walking on the boulevards with a friend, how shabby Wilde looked with a lustreless top-hat, a dingy collar and frayed cuffs to his frock-coat, and how, as he and his friend were leaving the café, Wilde drew him aside and "confusedly and in a whisper" said to him: "Listen, I must let you know, I am absolutely penniless (*absolument sans ressources*)"

In the same brochure Harris no doubt had read the letter from Wilde to Gide which the latter quotes in a letter about Wilde's situation in Paris in 1898, in which he writes.

It is none the less true that on the last occasions on which I saw Wilde, he seemed to me profoundly poverty-stricken (*miserable*), sad, helpless and despairing—such indeed as he depicts himself in this letter which he wrote me very shortly before his departure for Cannes (winter of 1898–1899) " However, just now, I am very unhappy—I have received nothing from my publisher in London who owes me money—and I am in a state of utter destitution So you see how ignoble the tragedy of my life has become—suffering is possible—is, perhaps, necessary, but poverty, destitution—that is what is terrible, what dirties a man's soul "

This letter, which shows Wilde's situation right up to the time when Harris proposed the journey to La Napoule, was under the eyes of the author of *The Life and Confessions* when he was depicting his friend as rioting viciously all that year in Paris

Douglas in his *Autobiography* states that he believes all that Frank Harris has written about the large sums of money he gave Wilde during his years of destitution in Paris But this opinion has been greatly modified since Douglas has now come to a most definite conclusion, which he asserts with his characteristic emphasis, that Harris in his financial transactions with Wilde reimbursed himself many times over for what he may have given him, by the shameless and heartless way in which he plundered him over the play *Mr and Mrs Daventry*,

which was entirely Wilde's production. He goes so far as to state his definite belief that the anger and indignation of Wilde at being thus robbed by his "friend" undoubtedly hastened Wilde's death. He has even said to me that Wilde might very easily have lived another two or three years if it had not been for the terrible distress that this victimization by Harris caused him. There is no doubt that there may be a good deal in this theory, for everybody knows that intense worry on a sick-bed is the best trump card that *la Camarde* can produce from her sleeve.

I myself do not believe a word of Harris's bunco-steering yarns. He represents himself as, in one period of six days, having given Wilde over two thousand dollars as a present and in the "full summer" of 1900, he tells us (on p. 515) that, Wilde having suggested he should give him £50 for the scenario of the play that afterwards developed into *Mr and Mrs Daventry*, he did produce this magnificent sum "after a good deal of talk" and on the further condition that Wilde should promise to write the first Act, a great sacrifice, a great act of generosity on his part seeing that, as he told Wilde on that occasion, he didn't care about writing plays, because stage-effects were so "theatrical."

Possibly to palliate the unspeakable meanness displayed in this admission, he, some pages later on (p. 530) tells us that to console Wilde, whose tears were pouring down his cheeks, for Bosie's refusal to settle £3,000 on him, he, Harris, would provide him with an income of a "hundred or so" a year, which he points out "wasn't very much." Just two half-pages farther on, however, he informs us that on his return to London, Oscar who was dying at the time pestered him by almost every post for money, to which appeals he gave a "curt" refusal, inasmuch as he had already paid him more than the £50 agreed upon for the scenario, and because he was "hard-up" himself at the time, i.e. a month or two after

he had promised to provide Oscar regularly with an income of a "hundred or so" a year

But the utter hollowness of this boasting claim of having behaved with great generosity to the unhappy poet whose genius he was trying to exploit for his own ends, is most strikingly shown by the falsehood with which he tries to camouflage his treatment of Wilde during the last twenty-four hours of his tormented life. Wilde is penniless in the Hôtel d'Alsace; besides six or seven hundred pounds of debts in Paris, he owes his kind and devoted landlord 2,268 francs. The last money he has received from anywhere is the £10 which Alfred Douglas had sent after an appeal from Ross, with a letter which makes Oscar "weep a little." This was on November 12th, 1900. On November 29th, Ross having been urgently summoned to Paris by Reginald Turner, wires to Harris that Oscar is dying, hasn't twenty-four more hours to live. He did actually die the next day at a little before 2 p.m. and there was so little money in the place, that only two days later was Ross able to pay Dupoirier £8 on account of his bill of £90 odd. But for the hurried arrival of Alfred Douglas, who shared the expenses of the funeral with Ross and Turner, the penniless poet would have been buried by the municipality in the fosse commune after a station at the morgue mortuary. Harris had been informed by another wire from Ross on the 30th that his friend, Wilde, was dead and that there was no money with which to bury him. Harris sent no money and did not come to the funeral. The poor man was ill in bed, you see. He was ill in bed on November 29th when Ross's telegram came telling him that Oscar had not twenty-four hours to live, too ill to move, or of course he would have gone to Paris at once. But, although he tells us eight lines lower down that he was so hard up himself, that he could not see his way clear to wire any money to Paris on 30th, he had the previous day sent for T. H. Bell and, having given

him cash and a cheque besides, had begged him to go at once to Paris to relieve the terrible situation at the Hôtel d'Alsace and to let him know if Oscar was as poorly as Ross made him out to be. The next afternoon—note the fatality of it all—just about the time when Oscar had breathed his last in a “deep sigh”—Mrs. T. H. Bell comes to tell Harris that Tom hasn't started, that he is down with asthma, but would go as soon as he felt equal to the journey. It apparently had not occurred to Tom to remit the cheque and cash which Harris had given him the day before to Paris where money was so sorely needed. Even if he had sent it by letter-post it would have reached the Hôtel d'Alsace a few hours before Oscar died.

It is rather difficult to believe that Harris was as hard up as he tells us. The cheque and the money to Tom Bell on the 29th don't look much like great financial embarrassment on the 30th. But there is something else, which is that on November 30th, Harris's play, *Mr and Mrs Davenport*, had been running already five weeks. It had been produced at The Royalty Theatre on October 25th, 1900. It was generally supposed in London to have been written by Wilde and people were flocking to see it. It was a great financial success and indeed ran in London alone for over 117 nights. By November 30th Harris's banking account had already been alimanted with the royalties on over forty performances (evening and matinée), for almost every cent of which Harris knew himself indebted to Wilde's brain. And Wilde was dying, nay, Wilde was dead and Harris knew it an hour or two after Mrs. Tom Bell's visit, for then Ross's second telegram arrived to tell him so. To camouflage his mean and callous conduct, Harris, who was so foolish as to print Robert Ross's “Oscar's Last Days” in the Appendix to his book, thus exposing the falsity of his own account, tells us that after November 30th, “day after day passed” while he lay on his

sick-bed feeling ever so much more poorly because his thoughts about and anxiety for Oscar Wilde were so very disturbing. He tells us that after this period his doubts were at last put at rest by the receipt of a telegram from Paris informing him that Oscar Wilde was dead. I can't help wondering who sent him that telegram. It must have been somebody who had not what Jo' Pulitzer used to call "a good nose for news," because already on the morning of December 1st, indeed already in the late evening editions on November 30th, every newspaper throughout the civilized world had published this item and Harris might well have heard of it not long after Mrs. Bell's call. Of course it is quite possible that as he was so very poorly such distressing news would be thoughtfully withheld by his nurses and attendants from the great-hearted invalid and that day after day he was kept in ignorance till some blundering fool in Paris, with more money than nose for news, sent him the fatal telegram.

One is not disputing that Harris spent a lot of money in treating Wilde on his occasional visits to Paris. It was good publicity for him to figure as the great-hearted friend, reckless of public opinion, who was proud to be seen in the company of the man whom the world had ostracized. It was, however, only too apparent that there was little kindness for, or consideration of, Wilde in the expensive and vulgar hospitality which he forced upon him. To bring a poorly dressed man from a Latin quarter lodging-house to play vis-à-vis to him, the boisterous Harris, and to cue his noisy and objectionable tirades in front of an audience of fashionable Parisians who had known Wilde in the days of his supremacy, was to pillory him in a cruel fashion. He seems even to have used his hospitality for the deliberate purpose of humiliating his guest.

He would give him a standing invitation to lunch and dine with him at some fashionable and expensive place like Durand's every day during his stay in Paris, but . . . here is what hap-



pened, as described by Wilde in the same letter to Ross in which he tells him he is going with Harris, at Harris's charges and as his guest, to Napoule. He says Harris has been "most nice and kind," and that they lunch and dine together every day at Durand's, but that while he, Oscar, lunches at 1 p.m. and dines at 8 p.m., Harris never comes to the first meal before 2.30 p.m. or to dinner before 9.15, which Oscar says is rather tedious, adding that people ought not to make a formal rule of unpunctuality. He says he has splendid if solitary meals, and that when his lagging host does come on the scene he, Oscar, is expected to be brilliant in the highest degree.

It is difficult for me to understand how Wilde could have put up with such calculated discourtesy after it had been repeated once. How were the mighty fallen! Durand's was in those days a fashionable restaurant which was largely patronized by the attachés at the British and other Embassies. It was before such an *audience d'élite* that Harris exhibited poor lustreless Wilde feeding at his expense, lunching and dining alone, and waiting for Harris, booted, spurred and befrogged, to arrive in the cage of circumambient contempt, to put him like an old lion through his paces and to pay the bill.

There was neither kindness nor generosity in these feasts that his moneyed friend, in those mournful days of his starved and lonely life, spread for the poor fellow. He was asked as, and must have felt himself the hired entertainer, the paid *pique-assiette*, invited—high intellectual pressure being always insisted upon—to amuse his host for the fee of a meal and a cab-fare home to his dreary bedroom.

He would read pity in the eyes of the young attachés and in the manner of the waiters, who would sense that he had not one louis in his pocket, a veiled insolence.

It was no doubt in the same spirit of contemptuous indifference to Wilde's feelings that Harris, after all the arrangements

had been made for the journey to Napoule, pitched him "the means for the journey" and left him to go alone, "disappearing mysteriously"

Harris was not generous to friends in misfortune. In a recent biography of him in a passage where his "Contemporary Portrait" of poor Ernest Dowson is referred to, we are told that this was Harris's favourite portrait and that Frank Harris knew Dowson well. During the seven or eight years that Dowson and I were friends, I never once heard Harris's name mentioned by him. There is not a single reference to Harris in Victor Plarr's biography of the gentle poet, not a single mention of his name in the numerous letters from Ernest that Victor Plarr publishes. During the whole time that Dowson was in great poverty in London in 1899—the year in which Harris was rolling in money—he never made a single inquiry after the unfortunate poet whom I found literally starving in his garret in the Euston Road. He was too weak and ill to get up and go out for food and his landlord, an Italian music master, refused to let him have any other meals except his early breakfast which was usually served to him with a torrent of abuse. He was then existing on 30s a week very irregularly paid him by Smithers for translating into English verse French eighteenth-century books of the most objectionable nature. He was with me at my cottage in Catford after I had found him miserably weak, ill and ragged in the Strand, for six weeks, dying of consumption. His condition was very well known in Fleet Street and Harris must have been very well aware of it, if he ever knew Dowson at all. On the morning of the poor man's miserable death—I was holding him up in bed when he died—I sent a scathing letter about how this man of genius had been allowed to perish by his friends, without one finger being raised to help him, to the *Daily Telegraph*, which set all London agog and which would surely have come to Harris's ears. Yet he was not one of

the many distinguished persons who attended his funeral at Lewisham Catholic Cemetery. I need hardly say that no inquiry came from Harris, nor was the famous two-horse brougham ever sent to fetch me to come and talk to him of the death of this king of lyric verse

Someone did come, however, to inquire very closely and with me to visit poor Dowson's grave, and that was Arthur Symons, whom Harris afterwards so shamelessly plagiarized for his "Contemporary Portrait" of Dowson

I am also well aware that during the whole time of Guy de Maupassant's last long agony in my friend Dr Blanche's madhouse there was not one single inquiry ever made by Harris about the "friend" whom he professes to have known so well, and whom he certainly never met through Taine, though he says he did. He knew very well what Maupassant's condition was, for I told Wilde about it after I had had an interview with Dr Blanche and Wilde had immediately sent the news to Lady Dorothy Nevill, who would of course pass it on to Harris, who according to his own account was an intimate friend of hers

But with regard to the Dowson portrait, it seems to have done a great deal to make Americans love and admire the poor lad and to establish his fame, and to send him down to posterity in a character as lovable as the presentment of Wilde in the only detestable facet of his character is odious. Harris was undoubtedly gifted with spiritual insight and possibly his picture of Wilde the homosexualist is as fine a portrayal as it appears to have been to Robert Ross. I daresay people of that lamentable brotherhood may admire the portrait, or those who fancy that this was the sort of man he must have been. I never saw Wilde the homosexualist. As Lord Alfred Douglas wrote me, he carefully concealed all that side of his life from me and when I first wrote about him I honestly did not believe that, except under the influence of drink, he could ever

have conducted himself in a way to arouse such a suspicion. I never thought he was thus congenitally afflicted because I never felt in his company the curious physical manifestation of my nerves which I remember describing to Sir George Lewis at the Old Bailey during Douglas's trial for libel. I then told Lewis that I had never believed Wilde to be a man of that sort because I had never felt in his presence the natural warning of a feeling like goose-flesh that always made me creepy when I was near enough to a person of whom I knew nothing at the time but who I afterwards learned was an unfortunate member of the brotherhood "That is exactly what I feel," said the lawyer, with a shiver. From the first day to the last of my contact with Wilde during seventeen years, I knew Wilde as the charming, brilliant talker, Wilde as the stimulating optimist, Wilde as the self-sacrificing and devoted friend, Wilde as the genial *leutseliger Herr*, Wilde as the wit, Wilde as the good son, Wilde as the kind husband, the affectionate father, and I think that in any of these capacities he is more worthy of the study of posterity (outside the clinics, mental and physical) than in the sole character of a pervert whom an acquired disease had rendered still more of interest to pathologists only.

The recent biography of Harris alluded to above gives certain chronological data which prove that the stories of this constant hospitality to Wilde in the early years '83 and '84 are as imaginary as much else, or that if he entertained Wilde it would perforce be at Lockhart's or Peace and Plenty's or at the famous Harris shops where a speciality was made of "hot dogs" and mashed potatoes. We are told that in those days Harris had only a very small post as a reporter on the *Evening News*, lived in obscure lodgings and went about very shabbily dressed. As such he would be in no position to entertain the radiant Wilde of *The Sphinx* and *The Duchess of Padua*. It was, in fact, not till after he had become editor

of the *Fortnightly Review* and had married Mrs. Clayton, that is to say in 1886, that he was ever Wilde's host. But *au fond* I believe that Wilde would have enjoyed his hospitality more at a hot dog and mashed potatoes emporium, where the ordinary tenets of courtesy due from a host to a guest were observed, than eating the sumptuous meals at Maire's or Durand's twelve years later, where he was left to feed alone and to wait an hour or two for the arrival of the man who had invited him, and to whose triumphal car he was yoked.

It is not, however, with Frank Harris, the man or the host, that I have to deal, except in so far as his descriptions of himself in these capacities, bearing upon passages in his book, expose its worthlessness as a biography for the enlightenment of posterity. It is his book that I am studying. The untruthfulness about the "confessions" has, I think, been irrefutably proven. I have also shown how inadequate it is as a "Life" by stressing the fact that while he gives enormous space to reports of fabricated conversations between himself and Wilde, he dismisses with the briefest mentions such important periods in Wilde's career as his life at Trinity and at Oxford and the fruitful months of endeavour and creation that he spent in Paris in 1882-1883. Of much that was significant and of interest in the external facts of Wilde's life between their separation at Napoules and Oscar's death two years later he has nothing to say at all, Wilde's journey to Switzerland with Mellor, his halt at Genoa and his visit to his wife's grave, his stay with Mellor at Gland, his return to Genoa (maybe to live near where Constance lay), his return to Paris, his miserable destitution there and most important of all, his journey to Italy at the beginning of 1900. On the latter very interesting episode he does not write one single word.

After describing an imaginary lunch he had with Wilde (who at that time was with Mellor in Switzerland) at the Réserve at Beaulieu (p. 508) he skips all the intervening period

till the "full summer" of 1899 when he was in Paris, and when Oscar "lunched and dined with him as usual." I have considerable doubts in my mind whether he did see Oscar at that time at all, because if he had had any conversation at all with him he would not have told us that he (Oscar) was staying at "the mean little hotel in the rue des 'Beaux Arts,'" which makes one suppose Wilde had returned to the Hôtel de Nice; nor would he have antedated by a year Oscar's complaint about the rash that had broken out all over him and which he tells us Oscar attributed to having eaten some "mussels and oysters" in Italy. One pardons the inaccuracy, however, because it gives him the opportunity to quote one of the few witty sayings of Oscar's which he seems to have recalled in writing his book. Oscar has been complaining about doctors and disputing their utility, but adds: "the best of it is, they all listen to you with an air of intense interest when you are talking about yourself—which is an excellent tonic." To the whole of this period in the summer of 1899 Harris devotes just four pages, which are taken up with two conversations, the one about the doctors followed by a disparaging story of Wilde's about Mellor's hospitality, and the next where the Florentine bronze is resuscitated which gives Harris an opportunity of showing Oscar in the odious rôle of the satiated and therefore callous seducer, indifferent to his victim's subsequent lot and telling him (Harris) that "of course" he has replaced him by somebody else, change being the essence of passion. Some filthy talk about the sting of passion, the stimulus of cruelty and the Marquis de Sade follows and the couple part, not to meet again till the late spring of 1900. The rest of the book is taken up with Harris's bargain for and acquisition of the scenario of *Mr and Mrs Daventry*, his alleged squabbles with Oscar over payments, and a purely *ex parte* account of the quarrel between Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas with long manipulated reports of what each said to

him (Harris) of the other. Then comes the statement that in September he went over to Paris to settle finally with Wilde, whom he describes as "well in health"—at a time when the poor fellow was fighting the agonizing pains in his ear with constant injections of morphine and was bracing his shattered nerves to face a horrible operation, which eventually took place on October 11th. He then returns to London, is busy with his play, though he rather wisely kept away from the première on October 25th and leaves Oscar without news of its triumphant success, sits back and lets the royalties pour in during the next five weeks, hears Oscar is *in articulo mortis* on the 29th of November and being so ill that all news has to be kept from him does not learn of his friend's death till several days after Ross's second wire had been sent to acquaint him of the fact.

Wilde's journey, with the money provided by Lord Alfred, to Italy in the spring of 1900 is briefly but efficiently described by Léon Lemonnier, who has had access to the letters which Wilde wrote to Robert Ross during its course. They are admirable material for a conscientious biographer. Sicily, the seminarists in the roof of Palermo Cathedral, his fine words about poverty as the road to Heaven to the very poorest among them, Rome, his magnificent bow to the King, his eagerness to take all for himself alone the Pope's benediction, delivered with an "ineffably graceful gesture" of the hand. It was one long "period of enchantment." Yet he never says one word about it all to Harris when they meet in Paris, or at any rate Harris does not think it of any interest whatever. Yet if Oscar narrated what must have been one of the happiest periods of his life in the same way in which he described it in his letters to Robert Ross he showed how little, though the rest of him was dying, the Lord of Language was dead.

The other items referred to would not, I think, have been left unnoticed by a chronicler who was truly faithful. On

returning in March, 1899, from Gland, Wilde, feeling humiliated by his treatment there, went to Genoa and on April 2nd was writing from the Albergo di Firenze, a low inn on the quays. Later letters to Ross were dated from Santa Margherita and it was here that Ross visited him and induced him to return to Paris, whither he accompanied him. He put up first at the Hôtel de la Néva, was turned out, and went to the Hôtel Marsollier off the Avenue de l'Opéra. Here his destitution was such that far from rioting he was again unable to pay his bill—a bill of £5—and one evening towards the end of September was turned penniless into the streets, his effects being held by the abusive landlord. He went over to the rue des Beaux Arts, possibly hoping to coax the landlord of the Hôtel de Nice to give him another trial, when he met Dupoirier who kept a small hotel in that same street. The two men were known to each other. Wilde had spent a short time at the Hôtel d'Alsace previously, but Dupoirier had become suspicious about his money and had forced him to leave his house, the bill being unpaid. Wilde told the kind-hearted little man of his grievous plight and Dupoirier immediately bade him in God's name come back to his old room, and set off to redeem his new lodger's belongings in pawn at the Hôtel Marsollier. Here Wilde lived the thirteen months of life that remained to him, here at number 13 of the rue des Beaux Arts, and it was with Dupoirier alone watching his bedside that he died while Ross and Turner were for a moment out of the room.

But it was not to Harris's interest to give any of these particulars. His business was to show a Wilde with a fixed income of £300 a year, supplemented by his own boundless liberalities and later by those of Lord Alfred Douglas—making out that he had in addition to his income at least £2,000 to spend in the last ten months of his wretched life—a Wilde rioting in Paris not only with the Florentine bronzes of his adoration



but with troops of "roaring boulevardiers," and worse, with Parisian outcasts of the Clibburn, Allen and Atkins type. In the "New Preface" he wrote that he actually saw Wilde in the last year of his life more than once entertaining companies of lads of the lowest type at the Grand Café on the boulevards. To get credence from anybody who knew the Paris of 1900 for such a statement would be like asking a Londoner to believe that he had seen an Archbishop entertaining a couple of Piccadilly prostitutes to tea and toast in the smoke-room of the Athenæum Club, or a New Yorker to swallow the statement that he frequently saw old John Jacob Astor shooting craps with half a dozen buck negroes at Sherry's or Rector's. The Grand Café, largely frequented by leading French politicians and high Government officials, was most exclusive, and another point is that no restaurant business was ever carried on there. It was the rendezvous of chess-players. President Grévy was a steady customer.

Harris having set out to show Wilde in the worst possible light presents an abominably false picture of the man's existence in Paris during the few months between his return from Italy and his death at the Hôtel d'Alsace. I say it is not only a deliberate falsehood, but a patent absurdity. And this, in my next and last chapter, I hope definitely to prove and establish.

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE ACE UP MY SLEEVE

HARRIS for an obvious purpose, Crosland for one which it is difficult to explain, have represented Wilde as, during the two last years of his life, 1899, 1900, rioting in Paris, indulging evil passions in gluttony and drunkenness and have gone so far as to print and circulate the statement that, by Harris first and then by others, large sums of money were given to Wilde. For the ten months of 1900, it is specified, Wilde had from various sources £2,000 "in equal moieties" in addition to a private income, which Harris by inventing an allowance of £150 a year from Ross, fixes at £300. Total moneys therefore received and squandered by Wilde in those wretched ten months £2,300. Yet when he died, he died penniless, was owing £90 to his kind friend, the innkeeper, Dupoirier, and over £600 of what the French call "*dettes criardes*" (clamorous debts), outside debts owing at restaurants, cafés, to waiters and cab-drivers, dentist, besides tradesmen.

We have seen that in 1899 from the evidence of Gide and Wilde's letter to him what was his situation that year. We have seen also that in 1899 he was turned out of three seventh-rate lodging-houses because he couldn't pay miserably small bills. As to the annus mirabilis when his income leaped up to £2,300 or £230 a month, let us listen to Ernest Lajeunesse (who wrote that magnificent notice of Wilde's last months, his death and funeral, which I quoted in my *Twenty Years in Paris*) on Wilde in Paris after his return from Italy in 1900.

We should need here words rushing forth in torrents, a headlong

stampede of hopes, of intonations, of smiles, a frenzied downpour of phrases, of onomatopœics, gathered in the monotony of a wretched and mummified existence, to show the poet as he dies slowly, the poet who is not resigned and yet abandons himself, who fears death day by day amongst his fellow-men, but who in the narrow room of his gloomy inn calls for it, equal to equal. He has been into the country and to Italy, he longs for Spain, he wishes to return to the shores of the Mediterranean all that he can have is Paris, a Paris which has no longer more to offer him than holes into which he may creep to drink, a Paris which is deaf, a famished, spasmodic Paris, flushed here, there pale, a city without eternity and with no myth. Each day brings sufferings with it for him he has no longer either a court or a true friend, he falls into the blackest neurasthenia. *Money troubles harass him: the eight shillings a day which his family allows him are no longer supplemented by advances from publishers*, he ought to work, to write the plays which by signed contracts he has undertaken to write, yet he finds it impossible to leave his bed before three o'clock in the afternoon. He does not become embittered, he is simply dying out. One day he takes to his bed on the pretext that he has been poisoned by eating some mussels in a restaurant. When he rises from his bed again, it is like one who has made a bad recovery. He is haunted with a foreboding of death which in the end will kill him. He then tells all his stories in one breath, it is the bitter yet dazzling final piece of a display of superhuman fireworks. Those who, at the end of his life, heard him unravel the skein of gold and jewelled threads, the strong subtleties, the psychic and fantastic inventions with which he proposed to sew and embroider the tapestry of the plays and poems which he was going to write, those who saw him proud and indifferent, affronting extinction, and coughing or laughing out his ultimate phrasings, will keep the remembrance of a sight at once tragic and lofty, the sight of a man damned yet impassive, who refuses to perish altogether.

When Lajeunesse wrote the passage about the 10 francs a day which I have underlined, he evidently did not know of Douglas's proved gifts of money to Wilde but possibly he is referring to the period between August 16th, when Douglas sent him £15 (which but for the £10 that reached Wilde on November 10th was his last remittance), and his death. His

previous liberalities—and I have stated that nobody could ask more of the young man than to give his friend a larger sum than the total of his entire income for that year—had been swallowed up in that divine journey to Italy, in the rapture of which even poor thankless Wilde must have felt a glow of gratitude to the young Mæcenæ who had given him a few weeks of spiritual pleasure and surcease from gnawing anxieties. It must also be remembered that during all this period Wilde was fighting a terrible disease, which after wrecking his athletic physique and paralysing his magnificent brain, was then torturing him with unbearable pain. Towards the end it was only by constant injections of morphine with the Pravaz syringe that he could obtain any relief.

“There he lay,” said the landlord, pointing to the bed in which Wilde died, “with ice on his head, and in his delirium he swore at his pain. I was constantly giving him injections of morphine—this chagreen case contains the Pravaz syringe—to ease his hideous torture.”

His rent at Dupoirier’s was 90 francs, the remaining 210 francs of his monthly income would not go far, even allowing for Douglas’s gifts, towards doctors, nurses, morphine and all the expenses of fighting a tenacious and hellish disease. Certainly there was Harris’s £50, which may have paid for the cruel and abortive operation—but as to Harris’s other largesses, amounting, he tells us, to the moiety of £2,000.

My conversations with Dupoirier, which were taken down in writing immediately, enable me to prove that Wilde did NOT end as an “Unproductive drunkard and swindler,” as George Bernard Shaw describes him on Harris’s sole testimony, and fully confirm what Ernest Lajeunesse wrote about his efforts to keep his engagements with the people who had advanced him moneys on plays or scenarios he had promised to write for them.

Thus Dupoirier: “He used to work at nights—all night

long. As a rule he would come in at one o'clock in the morning and sit down to this table, and in the morning he would show me what he had written and 'I have earned 100 francs to-night,' he would say. And he seemed pleased and proud to think that he had earned 100 francs in one night . . . Towards the end it became very difficult for him to write, and he used to whip himself up with cognac. A litre bottle would hardly see him through the night. And he ate little and took but little exercise. He used to sleep till noon, and then breakfast, and then sleep again till five or six in the evening."

So much for the unproductive swindler and the glutton. Now for the debauchee rolling home dead-drunk, according to Harris, after two or more bottles of champagne and numerous cognacs.

Thus Duponier, pointing to the little courtyard below the window:

"And there is the table where Monsieur Melmoss used to sit and take his absinthe. But I never saw him drunk. *Parfois entre deux vins, ça se peut. Mais saoul, ça jamais.*" (A bit squiffy, perhaps, at times, but drunk, never.)

I will add that I myself never once saw him, during the seventeen years of our friendship, even "*entre deux vins*."

Eh, bien! Monsieur Georges Bernard Shaw?

But now to produce the ace that all this while I have had up my sleeve to trump Harris, to euchre Crosland.

In Crosland's *Oscar Wilde and Myself*, Harris's *Life and Confessions* and his New Preface, such very definite statements were made about Wilde's immorality during his last years in Paris, the hideous publicity which he gave to his perverse associations and the filthy miasma of scandal that swathed him like a cloud of ignominy when he walked abroad in Paris, that after asking myself for years: "If there be any truth in all this, what on earth was the Paris police doing?" I determined to act.

Let me repeat here from my *Life of Wilde* that during the whole time that he lived in Paris after his release from Reading Gaol he was under strict police supervision. Henri Bauer had told me that the Minister of the Interior had informed him that Wilde was being carefully watched by the police, and that on the least provocation he would be arrested, punished (for instance, for *détournement de mineurs*) and, of course, expelled the territory of the Republic, and he asked me to convey this warning to Oscar Wilde. "Now," as I wrote in my *Life* (now, *hélas!* wiped out by Harris), "as he was never interfered with to the time of his death, it seems very clear that he did nothing that warranted such interference, and that calumny has discovered what the spies of the rue de Jérusalem failed to observe." For instance, we have all heard the story of his being seen outside a café with his arm round the neck of an intoxicated sailor, himself with vine leaves in his hair. This story has been very largely circulated and of course sends shudders of horror over the frames of British Puritans. But the spectacle thus afforded, had it been noticed by an agent of the *brigade des mœurs*, would have sent him, as a worldly wise public servant, smiling along his road with some such reflection as this: "*Passablement cuité, le client*" ("Pretty well boozed, that fellow"). He would put this display of affection down not to some bestial lust, but to the mollifying effect of alcohol, namely maudlin sentimentality.

Still the statements were so definite and in the case of Harris's book and New Preface so detailed that—strong is my conviction was that all this was misrepresentation—I decided, *coûte que coûte*, to find out at headquarters in Paris what foundation there was for these stories.

And "*coûte que coûte*" there certainly was in the matter. For a man of seventy, whom life has dreadfully knocked about, it seemed a long, long voyage and journey from my mountain fastness in Corsica to Paris, many tiring leagues of sea and

land. And then how to approach Monsieur Chiappe, the Prefect of Police, the busiest man in Europe, the real go-getter of Paris, with whom I was unacquainted and who might well not respond enthusiastically to the request that I should have to make to him that he should disturb in their busy tasks the *employés* of the Prefecture to allow the archives where police reports are stored to be searched for any records of the doings of a foreigner who lived in Paris over thirty years ago. The doings of a foreigner who, it appears, was being charged in his country with scabrous things—nastiness to be recalled to light. The fatigue of the voyage and journey for a man who was old and ill and tired, and the cost of it all. Yes, it was a question indeed of *coûte que coûte*

And then one day while I was sitting with Philippe Bunau-Varilla, in the smoke-room of the Calvi Palace Hôtel in Calvi, calling up the hundred heavy times that had befallen us since first I interviewed the hero of the Panama Canal, over forty-six years ago in Paris after de Lesseps had introduced us, there came in upon us H E Monsieur Adolphe Landry, then as again afterwards Minister of Labour in the two last Laval Cabinets, and here I saw my introduction to his brother Corsican, M Chiappe, and the archives of the Prefecture throwing themselves wide open to an irresistible "Open Sesame" I was well acquainted with M. Landry and it was he who kindly on my behalf had prodded the reluctant British Government through M de Fleuriau to submit my name to H.M. the King, for his gracious permission to accept and wear the Cross of the Legion of Honour, which had been offered me some years previously for my book on Guy de Maupassant and services in connection with the Entente Cordiale. I attacked His Excellency at once and obtained from him then and there a warm note of introduction and recommendation to the Prefect of Police. Some days later found me at the Prefecture, on the morning of June 8th, 1931 I append the note that I

wrote out immediately on returning to the beautiful house of my dear friends Arthur and Hope Richardson, in the rue Notre Dame des Champs.

"On Monday morning, June 8th, 1931, having made an appointment by telephone on the Saturday before, I interviewed Monsieur Chiappe, the Paris Prefect of Police, to whom I had brought a warm letter of introduction from the Minister of Labour, and by his directions the archives of the Prefecture for the years during which Oscar Wilde was living in Paris, from December, 1897, to November 30th, 1900, were carefully searched for any dossier containing police reports about him. He had been under constant and strict police supervision and had there been anything whatever to report of an unfavourable nature on his habits or conduct—represented by Harris and Crosland to be so infamous—there would have been a bulky dossier about him from the *services* of the inspection of lodging-houses and that of the *police des mœurs*. There was not a single report to be found, there was no dossier whatever, there was not a *fiche* in the *fichier*, or card-index of the dossiers. In fact, in the parlance of the Prefecture, there was about him *rien au fichier* (nothing in the card-index), the supreme brevet of a man's inassailability."

Monsieur le Préfet, however, had told me that in August, 1914, just before the Battle of the Marne, his predecessor at the Prefecture, fearing that the Germans might enter Paris and take possession of the Prefecture of Police—it was at the time when the Government offices were being moved to Bordeaux—with all the other administrative bureaux, had burned a quantity of *special* dossiers, concerning prominent people in French society to hide many scandals from a malicious enemy. However, in each case there remained in the card-index (*fichier*) a card with the name and number on the dossier repeated upon it to show that such a dossier had existed and had been burned. No card referring to any Wilde dossier



was to be found in this *fichier* and this was sufficient proof that no such dossier had existed or had been burnt at the time of the great and malodorous holocaust. It was further pointed out to me that Wilde being a foreigner, an ex-convict and a penniless outcast with no social influence or connections whatever in Paris, it was highly improbable that the police authorities in 1914 would have seen any necessity for destroying any record of his misdoings and all the less so because at that time (1914) Oscar Wilde was the idol and admiration of the Germans and it would have been a great temptation to leave them clear documentary evidence (had any ever existed) to show the Germans what kind of a man they had been worshipping.

Monsieur Chiappe spoke to me very nicely about Wilde with absolutely nothing in his tone or manner to show that he had conceived at the time or harboured since any unfavourable opinion whatever about the man. He had made Wilde's personal acquaintance after his arrival in Paris in 1897 and had frequently met him at the Calisaya Bar on the boulevard des Italiens. He had never noticed anything reprehensible in his conduct or conversation. He then introduced me to his *chef de cabinet* and gave orders that the archives should be searched as I had requested. While this search was going on below—and it was a very thorough and exhaustive one—I spent about two hours in the room adjoining the Prefect's cabinet, with the Prefect's *chef de cabinet* and other high police officials. (One of these in private life is a most distinguished dramatist and poet.) All this while I was discussing my friend, and I will say that I did not hear one single disparaging remark about him. It is true that one of these gentlemen observed rather cynically to me, "Oh! so *you* believe in virtue, do you?" And he added: "You ought to come here one morning and go through my post with me. Quite half of my letters go in there"—pointing to the fireplace. But my impression was that there was nothing against Wilde in the minds of any of

the Prefecture people, and that he was regarded there with sympathy for his sufferings and compassion for his pitiable condition at the time of his death, rather than with the indignation and contempt that such conduct as Harris and others have described would have inspired—especially in such a place.

Indeed, as I was taking my leave, the archivist having reported that there was “Nothing, absolutely nothing” about Oscar Wilde in the police records, the playwright referred to above said to me as he shook hands “Wilde lived here in Paris in obscure poverty and died almost abandoned by all in a fifth-rate hotel. He had neither the means nor the physique to indulge in what you say is charged against him. We have no trace here of anything against him, neither any complaint nor adverse police report.” Here there was absolute concurrence amongst the high officials who were present, and nods of agreement. “You may,” he added, “deny with absolute confidence the truth *in toto* of the stories you say have been published about his conduct in Paris during the last years of his life.” And as I was going away he further said “You say it was a man who professed to be his dearest friend who has published these stories to besmirch his memory *Drôle d’ami!*” (A funny sort of friend.)

These gentlemen evidently did not agree with George Bernard Shaw that Harris “could not have carried his kindness towards Wilde’s memory further without sentimental folly.”

My endeavour throughout this book has been, while pitilessly exposing Harris’s biography of Wilde as a literary imposture of the most reprehensible kind, to say as little about Harris, the man, as possible. His latest biographers, Messrs. Tobin and Gertz, while greatly extolling him as an artist, give a terrible picture of his character. In so doing they afford me, in one striking passage on page 198 of *Frank Harris. A Study in Black and White*, a possible answer to the question

that has so long puzzled me: What, apart from the financial profits to be gained from his biography of Oscar Wilde, can have prompted Frank Harris to indite about the man he so admired and professed so deeply to love even worse "Lies and Libels" than those he wrote about the friend and admiration of his youth, Byron Smith, so pitilessly exposed by Kate Stephens, Byron Smith's faithful fiancée?

The passage in Tobin and Gertz's book is a quotation from a letter written by a man whom the authors describe as well authorized to write about Frank Harris, and who to judge from a reference in the index to their book is no other than T. H. Bell, who was so closely connected with Harris at the time of Wilde's death and who had afterwards grave reasons for complaining of Harris's treatment of him. He writes that the worst thing about Harris was not so much that he made a practice of plundering and defrauding his friends, but that after having plundered them he invariably slandered them so as to make any subsequent recriminations on their part against him for his dishonest treatment of them appear not statements of fact but mere abuse on their side, in one word utterly to discredit them in the eyes of the public. Doubtless this explains his treatment of Alfred Douglas. Doubtless it also explains why, having most certainly defrauded Wilde over the ghost-work he did for him (Harris) in connection with *Mr and Mrs. Daventry* and the other literary work which Wilde used to grind out under the whip of alcohol on those awful nights which Dupoirier described to me, he determined to represent him in the colours which inspired George Bernard Shaw and Maître Théry, amongst others, to pass on the dead man those judgements condemning him to eternal infamy that we have read. By premonitory slander he discredits in advance any attempts on the part of his friends to defend his memory even on the score of simple commercial rectitude. He is content he should go down to posterity as a reckless spendthrift, mendi-

cant and swindler, besides as . . . oh! how much else that is bad!

. . . . .

Yes! Xavier de Maistre was indeed right. There is much to be learned in a simple *Voyage Autour de Ma Chambre*, just by looking round the walls of one's room

. . . . .

There hangs on my study wall, opposite me where I write, a calendar for the year 1932, issued by the French Post Office for distribution by the postmen to their clients when they come to wish them a Happy New Year. It is chromolithographically illustrated with a picture of the Jay in Peacock's Feathers and represents the grotesque little bird gaudily arrayed strutting before three lordly peacocks. These are not looking at him. Their attitude is one of supreme indifference and lofty contempt. This *calendrier* consoles me every time I think of Harris the Playwright and dispenses me from any other posture in the matter

. . . . .

I have given names to these three lordly birds: the finest-looking one, of course, is Oscar Wilde. The second I call George Bernard Shaw, and the third, who is a little in the background in the picture, but oh! how contemptuous, is another playwright whose name, I think, was William Shakespeare

. . . . .

And elsewhere in this same study hangs a portrait of Maximilien Robespierre and not far from him one of Jean-Baptiste Carrier and when I look at these two pictures, I cannot help remembering how on the day of Thermidor 10th, *An 2* of the One and Indivisible Republic, the Proconsul fresh from the Noyades de Nantes was seen strutting along behind the tumbril on which the disfigured and agonizing body of his

friend, patron and benefactor was being dragged to the guillotine. He was "radiant" and as he walked along, and all the way to the Place de la Révolution, he was heard to shout, exciting the mob against the dying Robespierre, "*Mort aux tyrans! Death to the tyrants!*" It has been supposed that the base purpose of the man in this demonstration was to repudiate all responsibility for the alleged abominations of his friend. The two portraits—as I seem to hear Harris's shouts of obloquy following Wilde's tumbril down the long prospect of posterity—give me furiously to think

. . . . .  
Jean-Baptiste Carrier paid for his atrocious crimes and treachery under the knife of the guillotine on the Place de Grève. Robespierre was no longer there to protect him. The last thing he heard on earth was the tune of "*Ça ira!*" played in derision on a clarionet.

. . . . .  
When, many years after Carrier's death, they broke into the courtyard of the secluded house where he had lived and rioted in the Faubourg du Bourg-Fumé at Nantes, which after his departure had been locked up and was thought to be haunted by blood-stained phantoms, it was found to be all filled with one mass of stately arum lilies, lucent, fragrant, white, in serried ranks, a virginal, not-jocund, company

. . . . .  
Men said these were the souls of the innocent whom Carrier had done to death. Such as remembered him with a little kindness suggested these might have returned here fragrant with forgiveness. Not even his bitterest enemy, I think, may have conjured up such a picture as was inspired to Maître Théry by Harris concerning Wilde, of a booted and plumed Proconsul, gaudy with his tri-colour sash, haunting this place at nights to trample into the mud this fragrance, this whiteness,

this piety. If any emblems from the other world beautify any place where Wilde sinned on earth, these could not be there for pardon; for Wilde never did a cruel or even an unkind thing to any living being in the whole of his life. His grievous faults were all against himself. Nobody had aught for which to forgive him, more sinned against than sinning. Yet Harris has prompted a clever Frenchman to depict him creeping from his grave to crush into ordure the tributes of his sorrowing friends.

James Thomas Harris—for the “Frank” of his name (probably on the *lucus a non lucendo* principle) was assumed—died full of years amidst pleasant and lovely surroundings, leaving behind him works for which Mr George Bernard Shaw predicts immortality. According to Harris’s American biographers, Mr Shaw thinks it probable that in ten years from now Harris’s *My Life and Loves* will be on sale at every bookstall. He has already done for the *Life and Confessions of Oscar Wilde* all that he could do to ensure for this book, also, immortality. Eh, bien! Nous verrons!

## CHAPTER XX

### A FACER FOR SHAW

"THE evil that men do lives after them " Harris has left behind him a store of mendacious facts from which successive biographers have gleefully helped themselves and will continue to do so until the noisome emporium is razed to the ground and its contents reduced to malodorous ashes

In a recent biography, for instance, there occurs the following slanderous statement:

**He wanted more and more money . . . He even resorted to dishonesty in order to come by money. He made the scenario for a play and sold the exclusive rights to four or five people.**

The inventor of this cruel lie was Frank Harris—true to his tactics of defaming his victims so as to discredit any subsequent charges they might make against him. It was substantiated by George Bernard Shaw in the letter which he wrote to Harris in praise of his infamous book, and which Harris so skilfully used to advance his sales in the States

How great Shaw's mansuetude and tolerance towards Harris's publishing manœuvres has been, is shown by the fact that a special edition of his *Oscar Wilde: His Life and Confessions* was issued with George Bernard Shaw's name on the title-page as its sole author, so that purchasers were induced to believe that they were buying a book on Wilde by Shaw. When this was pointed out by Lord Alfred Douglas to George Bernard Shaw, the latter smilingly replied "Frankie would have nothing to do with that That would be some Yankee

publisher's trick." Unfortunately, Frankie was here not only author but publisher

G. B. Shaw, in his letter, not only expressed full belief in Harris's accusation against Wilde but wrote that this conduct on Wilde's part established the fact that Wilde died in Paris "an unproductive drunkard and swindler"

Shaw's present attitude on Harris's vile book in general, and on the specific falsehood about his having been swindled by Wilde over the scenario of *Mr and Mrs Daventry* in particular, is shown in the interview with the author of *The Apple Cart* from the able pen of Mr Hugh Kingsmill which I print as the next and last chapter in this book. When with gratitude and enthusiasm I accepted Kingsmill's chivalrous offer to see Shaw on the subject of his ill-advised recommendation of Harris's book, it was in the hope that Shaw would be sufficiently convinced of the way in which he had been bamboozled by Harris to withdraw this particular charge of swindling against Wilde. All the rest of his letter of recommendation left me unconcerned.

Well then, in his book Harris states that as soon as *Mr and Mrs Daventry* was announced as forthcoming at the Royalty Theatre, "a crowd of people" claimed prior rights in the scenario of this play.

This statement alone should have opened Bernard Shaw's eyes. No writer for the stage in England has had more experience of stage-craft than he. Did not accordingly the questions present themselves to his mind "Did Mrs. Campbell in announcing *Mr. and Mrs Daventry* give a résumé of the plot of the new play? And if she did not and the play was just announced in the same fashion as every other forthcoming play staged in London is advertised, how the dickens could Harris's "crowd of people" know what it was about and so decide that it was ~~based~~ on a scenario which they had bought from Wilde and in which they had "valuable rights"?



Harris's phantom crowd of defrauded playwrights next dwindles down to a selection of persons, whose names are given and of whom not one was a playwright or could have bought a scenario from Wilde with any intention of using it for the writing of a play.

The first person Harris names as having been swindled is Mrs. Brown-Potter, who, Harris says, declared that she had "bought a play from Oscar some years before for £100 (!)." Can Shaw see the Oscar of *The Importance of Being Earnest* selling a play for that sum?

I may add, as regards this lady, that some years after Oscar's death she and Murray Carson were staying at Guilsborough Hall with Irene Osgood (the then Mrs. Sherard) and myself and that though poor Wilde's tragic story and career as a playwright were discussed frequently and at great length between us, not at any moment was anything said by Mrs. Brown-Potter to indicate that she had ever had any reason to complain of Wilde's treatment of her

The other names given by Harris as having been defrauded by Oscar Wilde by buying the scenario which Harris had paid £50 for are Horace Sedger, Beerbohm Tree, George Alexander, Olga Nethersole, Leonard Smithers and Ada Rehan

I am not at present in a position to state what were the facts about Oscar's transactions, if any, with Miss Nethersole or with Horace Sedger, but as to Tree and Alexander, is not Harris's falsehood so transparent that it ought not to have deceived anyone? Tree was a very kind-hearted man and had—as he told me at the supper he gave to Lord Edward Cecil at the Garrick Club—a real affection and the greatest admiration for Wilde and it is quite possible he may have advanced £50, not as the purchase-price of a complete scenario—he was rather better informed as to the monetary value of a scenario by the author of *A Woman of No Importance* than either Frank Harris or G B Shaw—but as handsel on some

possible if problematic future work by the disgruntled playwright. He would fully realize the importance of giving earnest-money in this case and his good heart would do the rest. Harris might have added to his list of persons so defrauded the names of Hare and Wyndham because both these gentlemen gave Wilde money as a small advance on work which some day he might be able to do for them, Sir Charles coming specially over to Berneval to visit Wilde and comfort him. As to Alexander, who is going to believe that after cutting Wilde in the cruel and heartless way at Napoule which Wilde has described in one of his letters to Robert Ross, he would have approached him in the matter of a £50 scenario, or that Wilde would have responded if he had? That Oscar Wilde would have approached George Alexander, after having been publicly snubbed by him, is a proposition that does not demand one moment's investigation.

We now come to Smithers, whose case according to Harris was the worst and most heartless of Oscar's fraudulent manœuvres. Harris tells us that while *Mr and Mrs Daventry* was in rehearsal, Smithers "himself in dire need" came to him with a pathetic story how when Oscar was in "absolute need" in Italy he, Smithers, had induced a man named Roberts to advance him £100 on a play to be written by Wilde. During his tour in Italy in 1900, Oscar was at no time in want. He had the now capitalist Bosie behind him and was travelling at the charges of H. Mellor. Nor was Smithers in 1900 in any dire need. He was going over weekly to Dieppe and taking £60 in gold with him to be spent on the "mud-honey" for which his soul craved. I happen to know, for it was during one of his swine-fugues to France, that I rescued from starvation in the streets his hack, Ernest Dowson, and heard all about Smithers from him while he was slowly dying in my cottage at Catford.

That, however, Smithers had no claim at all on a pre-

empted *Mr and Mrs Daventry* is shown lower down by Harris himself where he writes: "the characters he" (Oscar) "sketched for Smithers and Roberts were altogether different from mine and were not known to me when I wrote my story."

Who, then, is going to believe Harris when he states that "about the twentieth representation of his play I paid Smithers"? Paid him what, and what for?

I don't and for the very good reason that meeting a draggled and limping Smithers down and out in Fleet Street some years later I took him into the bar at The Cock and made him drink his fill, and that while doing so he entertained me with a very different story as to the way he had been treated by Frank Harris, whom he described as "a blackmailing swindler."

I don't even believe that Smithers ever made any such claim on Harris. How could he, when Oscar had definitely, in a letter to him, disposed of any liability either towards him or towards Roberts? This letter, as well as a very amusing one about the Dreyfus case, is published in *La Tragédie Finale*, by the same Davray, by the way, who issued Harris's lies about Smithers and his claim to the French public. In this letter he expressly tells Smithers that he had never been his dupe and had seen through his manoeuvres to get a play from him for next to nothing, and he added that the part that Smithers had played in the whole business was not a very pretty one.

We now come to the last of the people whom Harris names as having been swindled by Wilde—Miss Ada Rehan. I commend the following passage to the very special attention of Mr. George Bernard Shaw. To my thinking this one passage alone justifies me in saying that at the bottom of Harris's abominable lies about "his friend" Oscar Wilde spite, envy, malice and all uncharitableness were the prompting motives.

The profound baseness of Frank Harris in this matter demonstrates itself by the fact that in order to adduce Robert

Ross's testimony, he actually interpolated a forged passage into Ross's pathetic "Oscar's Last Days." In this forgery Ross is made to repeat the names of all the persons whom Wilde had "swindled" over the scenario. This list of names includes also that of Ada Rehan, but gives Louis Nethersole not Miss Nethersole as one of Oscar's victims.

When this forgery was committed, namely in 1918, Robert Ross was dead and could not protest. Had he been living, I think that even Ross would not have allowed this use to be made of his name, this lying fabrication to pass unchallenged. No one better than Ross knew what had been the dealings between Oscar and Ada Rehan when by hazard they met in Paris in 1899, how Oscar had behaved on that occasion and with what sentiments towards the unhappy man the "swindled" Ada Rehan had parted from him for the last time.

I am so fortunate as to possess a probatory document about this meeting. It is an extract from a book of considerable interest entitled *Time Was*, published in 1932 by Messrs Hamish Hamilton Ltd, a book of memoirs written by Mr W. Graham Robertson, R B A, R O I, the distinguished artist and man of letters and to have permission both from him and from Mr James Hamilton, M A, L L B, managing director of Hamish Hamilton Ltd, to publish this extract. I commend it to the attention of Mr Bernard Shaw and ask him, when he has perused it, whether my publication of Mr. Graham Robertson's narrative can honestly be described (to quote his words in a letter to Mr Hugh Kingsmill) as a mere attempt to "throw a handful of soot on Frank Harris," or whether it is not fully justified by my wish to defend the memory of my friend against the charge of having swindled Ada Rehan. I am writing these lines, by the way, just fifty-three years after I first met Wilde in Paris (March, 1883) and can frankly say that not once in all those fifty-three years did I ever detect him in an untruth or find him guilty of a

mean and unworthy action—never once. For me, he is still alive.

And now let us hear what Mr. Graham Robertson and Miss Ada Rehan have to say about the meeting with him in Paris . . . I quote from page 230 of *Time Was*:

. he (Augustin Daly) died quite suddenly in Paris,<sup>1</sup> where he was staying on a holiday with Mrs. Daly and Miss Rehan

It was a terrible experience for the nervous, sensitive Ada Rehan, and when I next saw her I remember her telling me how much she had been helped and sustained by Oscar Wilde, whom she and her party had come across accidentally a few evenings before. She and the Dalys had been dining at a restaurant and, looking up, she had seen Oscar Wilde sitting with some man at a neighbouring table and looking at her tentatively. It was after the tragic shipwreck of his life, he was a wanderer and an exile, unrecognized by nearly all his former friends—and there he suddenly was, looking at her kindly and earnestly.

"I didn't know what to do," she told me. "Mr and Mrs Daly were with me and I could not tell how they would feel about it. You never *do* know with men when they are going to feel very proper and when they are not!"

I agreed that the male sense of propriety was liable to fluctuations.

"And *was* Mr. Daly feeling proper?" I inquired.

"No," said poor Ada, "he wasn't. It was such a relief if I could not have bowed I should have cried. So Mr. Wilde came over and sat with us and talked so charmingly—it was just like old times—we had a lovely evening. And then, *only a few days later*, Mr. Daly died. Arrangements had to be made and Mrs. Daly was not equal to taking them in hand. I seemed to be all alone and so confused and frightened. And then Oscar Wilde came to me and was more good and helpful than I can tell you—just like a very kind brother. I shall always think of him as he was to me through those few dreadful days."

This was the last direct news of Oscar Wilde that I ever received . . .

According to Harris, Wilde, whom he met in the summer

<sup>1</sup> Augustin Daly died on June 7th, 1899

of 1899, was living at the time of this rencontre with Ada Rehan in "the mean little hotel" in the rue des Beaux-Arts, where though he had "come out in great red blotches" all over his arms and back, he was busy carrying on a filthy intrigue with the successor to the young soldier about whom he had "confessed" to Harris when Harris accompanied him on the journey to Napoule, which never took place. Wilde, as a matter of fact, at the time he met Ada Rehan was living at the Hôtel Marsollier.

It seems to me quite possible that "the other man" with whom the Dalys and Miss Rehan saw him dining at Durand's was none other than Harris and that the latter not being invited to join the party at Daly's table, conceived an augmentation of jealous spite against his friend and revenged himself by giving a perfectly false account of his meeting with the American actress. In any case he knew of their having met and thought that this fact would lend some artistic verisimilitude to his story of what passed between them.

Frankly, could one hope, by throwing at him all the soot of all the chimney-sweeps in Christendom, to deepen the nigritude of such a man's character?

Harris's motive in accusing Wilde of dishonesty in the matter of the scenario proceeds from the time-honoured artifice of the pickpocket, who yells "Stop Thief!" and accuses the man he has robbed.

Harris basely defrauded Wilde over *Mr and Mrs Daventry*. On this subject I commend to the reader's special attention the following extract from a letter which Lord Alfred Douglas wrote me some years ago:

About *Mr and Mrs Daventry* [he writes], I have always believed that Oscar's rage and indignation against Harris about this killed him. Harris completely ruined the play and never paid Oscar his share of the royalties.

He then refers me to the story published in *The Bookman* of

New York (April-May, 1930) by T. H. Bell, who was at one time secretary to Harris and who exposed Harris's conduct *in extenso*. Unfortunately Bell's story of the Harris-Wilde association over *Mr. and Mrs. Daventry* is completely discredited by the fact that he adds to it an entirely imaginary account of how Harris, hearing Wilde was *in extremis*, sent him, Bell, over to Paris with a large sum of money for Oscar's relief, and of how he arrived to find Oscar dead on his bed, with Sisters of Mercy watching the corpse in a candle-lighted room. Bell's story is pure fake. Harris never sent him to Paris; Harris gave him no money to take to Oscar. Long before any train started for Paris on December 1st, Harris knew that Oscar was dead and beyond the need of charity. Bell not only never went to the Hôtel d'Alsace but has no idea what the house looked like. He speaks of entering the hotel by its side-entrance and of stepping from the staircase directly into Oscar's death chamber. The Hôtel d'Alsace has no side-entrance. To get to the room where in His Mercy God released my friend, one has to pass through an anteroom. Two men were in attendance in the house of death. Robert Ross and Reginald Turner. Bell says he gave the money he had brought over for Oscar to one of the two, which he cannot remember. He certainly did not give it to Ross, or the latter would have mentioned the fact in his account of what happened at the hotel between the death and the funeral. He says not a word of any visit from Bell. As to receiving any money through him from Harris he is also silent. We all know that the scarcity of cash in the Hôtel d'Alsace was very great and was not relieved until Douglas's arrival post-haste from Scotland. Ross was so hopelessly embarrassed, even after his large demands on Douglas's purse, for funeral charges and all the other expenses that he was only able to allot to the devoted landlord, Dupoirier, the sum of 200 francs—less than the eleventh part of what was owing on Oscar's last bill alone.

As to Reginald Turner, here is what he wrote me from Florence on April 24th of this year:

I hasten to answer your question. Though I couldn't swear in a Court of Law that Harris didn't send his secretary to the Hotel after Oscar's death, I could swear that he never got there. I was there all that day and among the various callers there was no one from Harris and no money from anyone. Had any been handed to Ross he would certainly have told me.

I will add that I had it from my late friend Louis Fabulet, that his friend and collaborator Viscount Robert d'Humières was convinced that Harris's treatment of the "swindler" Wilde over *Mr and Mrs Davenport* so maddened the unhappy playwright that he laid violent hands on himself and that his death was suicide. I hardly agree. I know Oscar's view on suicide. "The greatest compliment a man can pay to society." Of course the means were close to hand. His agony was so great from the tumour in his ear that morphia injections were constantly being administered to numb the pain and the bottle of the divine anæsthetic was within his reach. The Pravaz syringe with which Dupoirier used to administer up to eighty injections a day to Wilde, as well as his gold-mounted denture were on sale at the hotel, two years after his death.

Altogether, was it nice of Bernard Shaw, on the strength of Harris's statement to write of Oscar as dying a "swindler" and so to encourage a biographer to make about him the abominable assertion which I have quoted from page 154 of his compilation? It is true that this writer having on pages 106, 107 and 108 of the said compilation depicted Wilde on the sole evidence of André Gide as a monster and a criminal of the vilest type may well have considered it an anticlimax and venial, just to add a mild charge of dishonesty against the dead man.

We have seen in a preceding chapter how George Bernard Shaw prophesies that Harris's pornographic *My Life and*



*Loves* may very probably, in a few years from now, be found on sale at every bookstall

Meanwhile, with reference to the particular book of Harris's with which I have been dealing in these pages, all appeals to Mr. Shaw to modify his pronouncement on its excellence, veracity, and the authenticity of the charges made in it on almost every page against his brother craftsman, fellow-countryman, and fellow-townsmen have proved in vain. Pharaoh has hardened his heart—in what manner and to what extent is faithfully related in the following chapter by Mr. Hugh Kingsmill who, for this purpose, has taken the pen from a weary hand.

*Ouf!!*

## CHAPTER XXI

### PHARAOH HARDENS HIS HEART

#### AN INTERVIEW WITH MR BERNARD SHAW

IN the summer of this year (1932) Mr Robert Sherard wrote to me about my study of Frank Harris, which had appeared in the spring. In the course of this study, I had shown again and again, while analysing Harris's *Autobiography*, that he was completely unable to discriminate between what had happened and what he preferred to think had happened, whether in his own life or the lives of others. By the time I reached Harris's biography of Wilde, charity or exhaustion had weakened my detective zeal, and, while taking the same general view of Harris's attitude to Wilde as Mr Sherard takes in the preceding pages, I accepted as true the legend of the yacht at Erith and two or three other important episodes in the book.

Mr Sherard, in his letter, put me right on these points, and, after some further correspondence, sent me his destructive and absolutely convincing analysis of Harris's *Wilde*. I wrote to Mr Sherard, who was in Corsica, saying that Mr Shaw ought to see this analysis, which would convince him of his mistake in endorsing Harris's *Wilde* as the book by which Wilde must stand or fall. Mr Sherard consented to my approaching Bernard Shaw on the matter. I therefore wrote to Mr Shaw, giving the most important points in Mr Sherard's indictment of Harris. Mr Shaw replied that no doubt the famous lugger (the yacht at Erith) existed only in Frank's imagination, but that he was certain it would have materialized had Oscar con-

sented. He went on to say, in defence of Harris's pictures of Wilde's unrestrained debauchery in his last years, that it was clearly not plain living and high thinking which prevented Wilde writing in Paris; and he ended by suggesting that to convict Harris of a hundred lies would not discredit his powers of portraiture, though it might rake up all the mud into which Oscar finally sank, and once more obscure and befoul his very considerable literary achievements and the momentary nobilities of which he was capable "My verdict on Frank's Memoir," he wrote, "stands until I read a better one "

A postcard accompanied this letter. Mr Shaw suggested on it that I should persuade Sherard to let poor Oscar alone, and not rake up his vaguely remembered disgraces for the sake of throwing another handful of soot at Harris, which wouldn't whitewash Oscar The postcard concluded with an invitation to come and talk the matter over

On the Sunday before I called on Mr. Shaw, London was placarded with "OSCAR WILDE'S ARREST"; for the serialization of Edward Marjoribank's *Life of Lord Carson*, in the *Sunday Express*, had just reached that important moment in Lord Carson's career When Mr Shaw opened our talk by expressing his regret that Wilde's follies could not be left in the oblivion which was fast covering them, I asked him what he thought of the placards announcing Oscar Wilde's arrest which were on view throughout London on the previous Sunday Mr Shaw, who had spent the week-end in the country, was taken aback I pressed the point as far as I could It was indeed more than a point, it was a complete and unassailable argument for saving Wilde from liars and sensation-mongers But in the verbal prize-ring the effect of a knock-down blow is entirely neutralized if its recipient chooses to overlook the fact that it has been delivered. "You know," said Mr. Shaw, "Harris's *Wilde* is far more interesting than the real Wilde."

"But, Mr. Shaw, the point isn't whether Harris's *Wilde* is more interesting than Wilde was. The point is whether his biography deserves to be endorsed by you as the authoritative life by which Wilde must stand or fall. You call Wilde, on the strength of Harris's picture of his last days, 'an unproductive drunkard and swindler.' If you would look through Sherard's manuscript, I am sure you would not send down this phrase uncorrected to posterity." I then gave in outline the evidence which Mr. Sherard had collected from Wilde's landlord, and from Monsieur Chiappe, Prefect of the Paris Police, evidence which conclusively showed that Harris's picture was a malicious slander. Mr. Shaw looked thoughtful over Monsieur Chiappe. I felt that I was getting him into a corner, but a moment later he was back in the middle of the ring, listening with courteous attention to my attack on the disgusting and ridiculous scene in which Harris saddles Wilde with his own dislike of women during pregnancy.

"Ah, yes, yes. Ah, to be sure. Yes, yes."

No wonder, I thought, the Irish problem is insoluble.

"It's not a question of whitewashing Wilde," I persisted, "or even of taking Sherard's view of him. It's simply a question of making it clear that no confidence at all is to be placed in Harris's *Wilde*, which on the strength of your endorsement is everywhere accepted as the true account of Wilde."

"Oscar could be really charming at times."

At the end of an hour I gave it up. Mr. Shaw escorted me out of his flat and along the passage to the lift. I entered the lift, which contained three women, and as it began to descend I saw Mr. Shaw smiling benignly down on me. "Bernard Shaw!" the three women gasped. It was an impressive moment, but it would have been more impressive to me if Mr. Shaw had consented to repair the damage which he had done to the most brilliant wit and dramatist of his generation.

Public men are naturally reluctant to impair their prestige by withdrawing their pronouncements. But in this instance Mr. Shaw had simply to remind the world that since giving his endorsement of Harris's *Wilde* he had experienced in his own person what it felt like to be the subject of a biography by Frank Harris—an experience the rigours of which, he has himself told us, he very wisely mitigated by revising Harris's *Bernard Shaw* before publication, and in many places entirely rewriting it.

HUGH KINGSMILL.

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